

THE WORLD HAPPENS TWICE ELIZABETH HAND INTERVIEWED

BRITAIN'S LONGEST RUNNING SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

ISSUE 208

INTERZONt

SENSAWUNDA!

MIND-EXPANDING NEW STORIES

- ▶ two puny humans confront two huge enigmas
- ▶ terrifying autoscopes hunt down the re-born
- ▶ the star necromancers visit a dying universe

by JASON STODDARD JAY LAKE

PAUL MELOY & OTHERS

plus NEIL GAIMAN &
SUSANNA CLARKE

talk exclusively to you
about writing stories

plus NEWS & GOSSIP
from DAVID LANGFORD

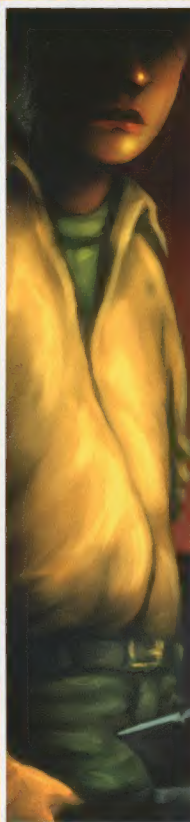
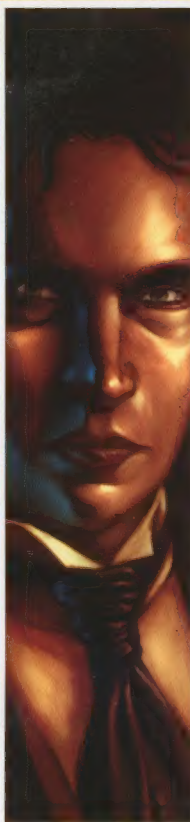
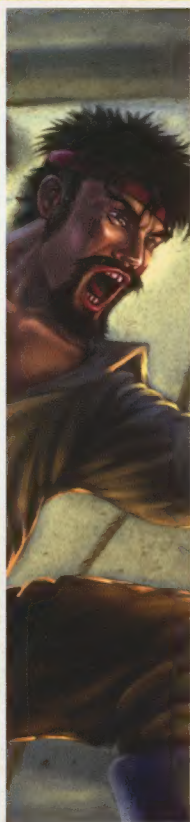
EXPERT REVIEWS of the
LATEST FILMS & BOOKS

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MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE ON SF FILMS



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TOKE BY TIM AKERS
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SENSAWUNDA!

Happy New Year! We start 2007 with a bang, and since the next issue marks our 25th anniversary we intend to keep the fireworks going throughout the year and make every issue special. This time we're presenting a collection of stories that shows you the many faces of 'sense of wonder'.

In Jason Stoddard's 'Softly Shining in the Forbidden Dark' *sensawunda* manifests in its most sfinal form: on an immense scale, confronting two puny humans with two huge enigmas. And while their decisions have far-reaching consequences, their motivations are still grounded on a very personal level. Conceptual breakthroughs, sense of wonder aching with a sense of dread, and an immense price to pay...

Sometimes *sensawunda* shows you a hauntingly familiar place that's still *off* in a strange way. G.D. Leeming's China has that evocative quality: partly exotic, partly familiar, partly unknowable. If people are secretly longing for 'Empty Clouds', you know you're in a different place indeed.

Sensawunda can happen on an everyday scale, like in Jay Lake's 'Where the Water Meets the Sky' (his devastating 'The American Dead' from issue 203 will be appearing in at least one *Year's Best* volume). It's one of those rare stories about a future that turns out for the better in a convincing way, because – for once – decency and common sense prevail, and people are learning to make amends.

Nor is *sensawunda* limited to sf, as the Autoscoptes in Paul Meloy's 'Islington Crocodiles' will tell you, just before they engulf you. The ailments of modern society, smouldering beneath the surface, are lifted from their gritty roots, emerging into a magical dimension in their most horrid and terrifying form. Hold on tight as chaos erupts!

Finally, *sensawunda* can harbour a sense of loss. In a dying universe, the gardener of a dark world has to face the enormous change brought by 'The Star Necromancers'. Is he merely a backwards farmer, a wise man, or both? And should we fight entropy forever? Awe and sorrow resonate and become indistinguishable...

John Clute is away and we've had to hold over Sarah Ash's *Mangazone*. Please see the centre pages for features and stories we have coming up. See you in March with *Interzone's* 25th anniversary issue! **Jetse**



LANGFORD PREPARES HIMSELF FOR ANOTHER OBITUARY

AS OTHERS SEE US

Australia welcomes its own sf pay-tv channel: 'Sci-fi fans are strange animals. Their natural habitat is their parents' basement and their traditional pastime is watching their favourite shows on DVD. But on December 1 all this changed. Now we can watch our favourite shows on Foxtel too. That's right, my pasty-faced friends [...] So grab your Klingon costume, put up an "I believe" poster in your parents' basement and veg out.' (Alice Clarke, *The Age*)

Margaret Atwood ran true to form in the *Wired* anthology of six-word sf stories: 'Starlet sex scandal. Giant squid involved.'

Arthur C. Clarke is no longer writing, and has arranged for dynamic young author Frederik Pohl (born two years later) to finish his new novel.

GREASY POLE

More novel awards... **World Fantasy:** Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*. **International Horror Guild:** Brett Easton Ellis, *Lunar Park*. **Children of the Night** (gothic): Sarah Singleton, *Century* – an *Interzone*/TTA author!

Terry Pratchett's best-kept secret was revealed on the BBC website: 'Terry Pratchett talks to Mark Lawson about his life and work, from the early days as a teenage journalist to his rise to fame as one of the world's most popular sci-fi writers under the name Iain M. Banks.' Ah, those faithful drones with hundreds of little legs...

AS OTHERS SEE US II

Space entrepreneurs on a field trip to Bigelow Aerospace: 'They couldn't have been more excited if the van had been on

the way to a *Star Trek*-themed strip club.' (Katherine Mangu-Ward, *Reason*)

John Clute revealed unexpected longings in a recent appreciation of Kim Stanley Robinson: 'A tureen might balance on the top of the head of Stan Robinson, like the antlers of Bambi... We noticed the low center of gravity of the man. The assumption of balance. The calmness of the eyes under the tureen one kept longing to place upon the head.'

Headline Masterclass. The *Sunday Telegraph* magazine ran a (good and serious) article on James Tiptree Jr by her biographer Julie Phillips, flagged on the cover as *The Woman from Mars: How a sex-change socialite became a sci-fi god*.

Christopher Priest was alarmed when *The Prestige* film dropped a name not found in his novel, nor in the annals of magic: one scene turns on the use of a stage magician's Langford knot, or 'Langford double'. ('I can slip a Langford under water...')

Winston Churchill 'was a closet science fiction fan who borrowed the lines for one of his most famous speeches from H.G. Wells.' (*Independent*) Apparently he lifted material from *A Modern Utopia* and *The War of the Worlds*. For slower readers, researcher Dr Richard Toye explained: 'It's a bit like Tony Blair borrowing phrases from *Star Trek* or *Doctor Who*.' But not very. ('Iraq: We Must Reverse The Polarity Of The Neutron Flow.')

Stephen Hawking announced that humanity must colonise planets in other solar systems, using *Trek*-style antimatter propulsion. (Reuters) So presumably this particular notion isn't sf any more?

AS OTHERS SEE US III

Slate continues to treat *Battlestar Galactica* as a special case: 'But most critics take pains to point out that this is more than another dorked-out sci-fi fest.'

THOG'S MASTERCLASS

Dept of Public Nudity in Old Glasgow. [273 years ago:] 'The inmates of these hovels earned a living by knitting caps and mufflers for the inhabitants of Glasgow who, even then, wore almost nothing else.'

(Alasdair Gray, 'The Crank That Made The Revolution', 1971)

Fortean Physics Dept. 'But what I mean is that if the ether is strong enough to convey from one central point to the ends of the Earth music and speech, and all the other things that are so broadcast, why shouldn't there be in space a kind of super-ether that will support mighty floating islands?' (Prof A.M. Low, *Adrift in the Stratosphere*, 1937) **Influence of Stephen R. Donaldson Dept.** 'Their horses were foul spine-sprung things, malandered about the necks, beshat greenly across the hindquarters, and trailing ropy harls of yellow snot blown from all the orifices of their heads.' (Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain*, 1997)

Somtow Sucharitkul (now writing fiction as S.P. Somtow) caused an unexpected stir in Thailand with his opera *Ayodhya*. Showing the death of the mythical demon king Thotsakan sent the Thai military government into a frenzy of superstitious alarm: this event had to be moved offstage. 'The composer said officials told him that any misfortunes which befell those in power would be blamed on the opera.' (BBC) Do UK terror laws allow us to quote *Macbeth* at Tony Blair?

THOG'S GENDER MASTERCLASS

The editor of the Bantam Spectra email newsletter may know something about the great Stan Robinson that the rest of us don't: 'Congratulations to Kim Stanley Robinson! Her technological eco-thriller *Fifty Degrees Below* is among *School Library Journal's* Best Adult Books of the Year for high school students!'

Stephen Baxter can't resist a little gloat: 'I noted NASA's announcement that they are planning a base at the lunar south pole – which is precisely where Clarke and I put our lunar base in *Sunstorm* last year [2005]. Clarke always goes on about this sort of thing, whereas I...oh. (I just hope we were wrong about the Sun exploding however.)'

Cinegeekery. The genre film magazine *Cinefantastique* – launched in 1970, renamed *CFQ* in 2002 – is 'on hiatus into 2007', whatever that means exactly. Subscribers instead received the new *Geek Monthly*, apparently its replacement, edited by *CFQ* editor Jeff Bond.

R.I.P.

Paul Ableman (1927–2006), UK author/playwright whose sf novel was the meta-fictional *The Twilight of the Vilp* (1969), died on 25 October aged 79.

Ron Bennett (1933–2006), UK fan and bookseller who edited the classic sf newsletter *Skyrack* (1959–1971), died on 5 November. He was 73.

Nelson S. Bond (1908–2006), old-time US author and rare book dealer whose first sf story appeared in *Astounding* in 1937, died on 4 November at age 97. SFWA honoured him as Author Emeritus in 1998. Who could forget his title 'Mr Mergenthwirker's Lobbies'?

Sydney J. Bounds (1920–2006), UK author active since 1946, who published four sf novels in the 1950s but became better known for horror, died on 24 November. He was 86 and had just sold his last novel, a western.

Nigel Kneale (1922–2006), UK TV scriptwriter and novelist most famous for his BBC serials *The Quatermass Experiment* (1953), *Quatermass II* (1955) and *Quatermass and the Pit* (1958–9), died on 29 October. He was 84. Other highly regarded productions were his 1954 adaptation of 1984, and the original plays *The Year of the Sex Olympics* (1969) and *The Stone Tape* (1972).

Maggie Noach (1949–2006), UK literary agent for many sf authors, died unexpectedly on 17 November. She was 57. Her current list included Brian Aldiss, Colin Greenland, Garry Kilworth and Geoff Ryman.

Leon E. Stover (1929–2006), US academic who wrote non-fiction about sf and collaborated with Harry Harrison on a novel and the 1968 anthology *Apeman, Spaceman*, died on 25 November; he was 77.

Philip Strick (1939–2006), UK film critic and sf enthusiast who taught Britain's first adult sf evening classes and wrote the 1976 *Science Fiction Movies*, died suddenly on 7 October.

John Symonds (1914–2006), UK author/playwright who wrote such children's fantasies as *The Magic Currant Bun* (1953) and was Aleister Crowley's literary executor, died on 21 October aged 92.

Jack Williamson (1908–2006), much-loved US author and academic whose astonishingly long sf career stretched from 'The Metal Man' (1928, *Amazing*) to a final novel in 2005, died on 10 November aged 98. His many awards included the 1973 Pilgrim for sf criticism, SFWA Grand Master status in 1976, and a 1985 Hugo for his autobiography *Wonder's Child*.

"It's like sex." Elizabeth Hand is very enthusiastic about writing novellas. "Short stories are like a quickie," she explains. "It can be kind of satisfying, but it's over really fast. A marathon novel-length session can be tiring and it's a big commitment. But a novella is just the right amount of time to kind of linger over everything, build a little bit... The novella is the classic length for supernatural stories, for ghost stories. If you're writing a fantasy novel or a science fiction novel, you need the time and space to do world-building or

to build up the logical background of your Middle Earth or whatever it is. And in a horror novel, you have to keep adding the effects over and over, scaring people.

"I've learned that it's a form I can do well. Writing at a high level of intensity is much easier in a novella. It's much harder to maintain in a novel. And in a short story, you don't have the time to build to it. With a novella you can really focus on character, which is what I like to do."

So does character come before plot when she's writing?

"Paul Witcover, a sometime collaborator, said people don't read my books for a plot but to find the correspondences between our world and another world, between one character and another, or between a real-world character and their legendary counterpart.

"That's what really interests me. Life does not have a plot: we want to impose a plot on it. And the books I tend to be drawn to are not necessarily plot-driven.

"Plot should emerge from characters. It's a binary process. A character goes here – they have to make a decision to do this or that – and until they reach that point they have to make another decision. It's constantly branching. I don't feel you should know the character is going to proceed from here to there. Or, I might know where she's going, but I don't know how she'll get there.

"There's an element of surprise I want to keep in the process of writing. Sometimes ideas come to me full-blown. Something seems to be fairly tightly-plotted and I write it that way beginning to end, and that's great. But I also like the process of discovering the world as the character does. *"Generation Loss* [published this Spring] is a more tightly-plotted book than anything I've written before, in part because it is a thriller. I had to educate myself a bit with a different set of rules to know how to proceed. That was challenging. It was good. I learned something technically about how to construct a story. But I don't think it's ever going to be the thing that interests me most about writing!"

Hand's engagement with her characters and her skill with the novella is evident in the World Fantasy award-winning *Bibliomancy* (2003). Its four novellas are a dark fantasy dealing with rape, revenge and butterflies ('Cleopatra Brimstone'); a moving account of last rites for Cal, a magnificent counter-cultural artist dying of cancer ('Pavane for a Prince of the Air'); an homage to writer John Crowley, the art of tattooing and the Tarot in 'The Least Trumps'; and 'Chip Crockett's Christmas Carol', a tale inspired by Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* and dedicated to Joey Ramone and Sandy Becker, a much-loved, imaginative early-1960s children's TV host in New York, presenter of *Sandy's Hour*. In October the first three of these tales will be reissued in a new collection, *Saffron and Brimstone* (M Press), which also includes five short stories



photograph © Norm Walters

THE WORLD HAPPENS TWICE ELIZABETH HAND

– ‘Wonderwall,’ plus four related pieces in a sequence called ‘The Lost Domain.’

‘Chip Crockett’s Christmas Carol’ was published again by Becon Press as a stand-alone novel last spring, featuring original illustrations by Judith Clute. Paul Di Filippo in *The Washington Post* described it as “A whole generation’s biography” – it certainly had that resonance for me.

I come from the Bronx, just south of Elizabeth Hand’s childhood home in Yonkers. We were both born in 1957. ‘Chip Crockett’ invoked my own memories of the world of *Sandy’s Hour*. Nothing was swinging yet in the early 60s. This was the arse-end of the 50s, a time of rigid conformity and fear of nuclear war. We both have memories of ‘shelter drills’ in schools where you crouched in the corridors, close to literally ‘kissing your ass goodbye.’

In an interview with Nick Gevers (*Redsine* 7, 1/2002) Liz said her cold-war childhood influenced the apocalyptic themes of her fiction. This is especially true with her ‘millennial’ 1997 novel, *Glimmering*. First written as near-future, its vision of an era is just behind us, but still sounds a contemporary note. ‘The Glimmering’ is a deadly version of the Northern Lights caused by heavy atmospheric pollution. It leads writers and artists to declare there is no point in creating, reminding me of similar post-9/11 declarations. On her website Liz says she too stopped writing for a while after 9/11. Why was that?

“It was just the terrible shock. I felt completely unworthy of coming up with any response to it. Not that I felt I needed to write a response, but I just felt like I couldn’t say anything for a while.

“I felt this very creepy sensation that when I wrote *Glimmering*, this was the way the world was going – with global warming, strange mutated viruses and terrorists attacking a New York City landmark. And in the intervening years, I saw some of these things come to pass.

“Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* was the first thing that really confronted the AIDS epidemic. And it may be that not enough time has elapsed since 9/11. When books started appearing in the States, people were saying: ‘is it too soon?’ I don’t know that it’s too soon to write about it, but it may be too soon to engage with the cultural impact. In the short-term, the grief, horror and sense of loss are all there;

but in the longer term I don’t know if we’ve had enough time to absorb it.”

We’re holding this interview in another setting for Liz’s tales: Camden Town. This is where Jane from ‘Cleopatra Brimstone’ visits fetish clubs and where she collects the rarest of butterflies. It’s a fitting place to be talking about her novel *Mortal Love* (2005) a sensuous and haunting exploration of artistic inspiration – a potent brew of the Pre-Raphaelites, the ever-mad Richard Dadd, Swinburne, folk music, punk and faeries.

In the 19th century, artist Radbourne Comstock is hired to work at a lunatic asylum in Cornwall, where he comes into contact with a strange and compelling woman called Evienne Upstone. In the 21st century, music journalist Daniel is in London researching a book on the Pre-Raphaelites. Meanwhile, a descendant of Comstock grows up on an isolated island in Maine – and he sets out for London too.

In Camden Town Daniel meets Larkin Meade and undergoes a profound visionary sexual experience. The book invokes Camden sights, smells and tastes: the shop with the huge Doc Martin over the door, Inverness Street market, the busy canal at night.

“Every time I come to London I think of Daniel,” says Liz. “Of the characters I’ve written, he’s among the ones I love the best. I have used some more than once. Sometimes minor characters from one book have a larger role in another. So, I wouldn’t close the door on using him again. But then, how reasonable is it to expect somebody will have an encounter with the faerie queen and then go on to something else?”

I always want to see what happens after a character’s shattering or transcendent experience: there is a whole other story in how they try to live in the everyday world afterwards. I ask Liz if Larkin might reappear in another book even though she’s been packed off home!

Liz laughs. “I don’t think she’s gonna stay at home. But I don’t know that I would write about her again. But after I finished *Mortal Love* and wrote a completely different kind of book and some stories, I did find that I wanted to write about faeries more than before.”

Glimpses of their world come in all the shades of green – from a tunnel under London, a porthole in Larkin’s boat, a

terrifying vision of conflict between human figures and beings of light, energy and sound that Daniel is forced to see.

With *Mortal Love*, I became intrigued by the idea of two places coinciding and the possibility of individuals, such as Larkin, getting ‘stuck’. Some recent reading about string theory and parallel worlds gave me a perspective on *Mortal Love* that made it science fiction as much as a gritty, dark mythical fantasy.

“It’s funny, I’ve been thinking a lot about string theory,” says Liz. “It wasn’t specifically in my mind with *Mortal Love*, although it could be made to retrofit. I don’t know much beyond what I’ve read in a few articles geared for lay people, but it’s intriguing. My very short story ‘Kronia’ (in *Saffron and Brimstone*) is a string theory experiment.

“It’s an intoxicating idea. The notion of parallel lives, parallel worlds...repetition of a self, a person or series of actions. In a mythic sense, in a literary sense, you can take the same story and play it out over and over again.

“And in some short stories I wrote after *Mortal Love* I took real events, toyed with them and played them out. Like *Unfaithfully Yours*, the movie with Rex Harrison. He’s a conductor imagining his wife’s infidelity. He plays out how he’s going to confront her, each time with different music as background. And so in *Mortal Love* I take the Tristan and Isolde story, and then also Titania and Oberon. It echoes Burne Jones and Maria Zambacco.”

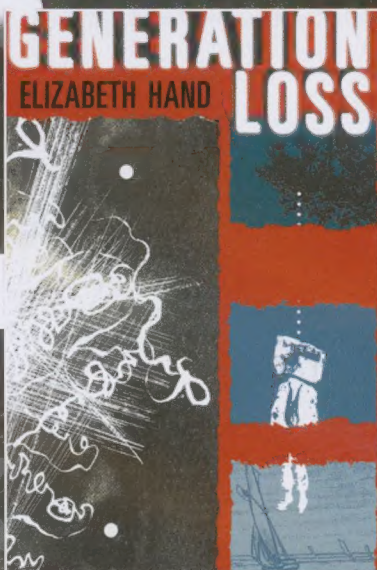
This is a thread running through many of Hand’s books. In *Winterlong* the ritualistic coming together of two key people in a post-apocalyptic Washington DC may open the way to further upheaval; there is that same element in *Black Light* and *Waking the Moon* in very real 1970s/80s worlds. But though the story is similar, each book sheds a different light on it.

“Yeah, I love myths and legends and lore. On one hand, I don’t want to be going to the well too often. On the other, it is really what I love.”

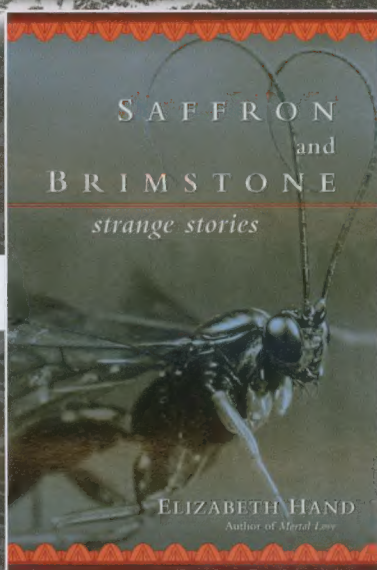
The themes of creativity and mortality in *Mortal Love* seem to have a direct lineage to ‘Last Summer at Mars Hill’, an award-winning novella that gave its title to a collection published in 1998. Young Mooney spends each summer with her family in an eccentric spiritualist community in Maine. She discovers

INTERVIEW BY ROSANNE RABINOWITZ

Small Beer Press, 320pp, \$24 hb (April)



M Press, 325pp, \$14.95 hb (out now)



PS Publishing, novella, £10 pb/£25 hb (out now)



her mother has breast cancer and the community harbours a secret that may be a key to recovery. Another visitor to Mars Hill is Martin Dionysius, a gay artist with AIDS, who turns up as a central character in *Glimmering*.

It's said the luminous creatures haunting Mars Hill "feast on our mortality" and thus prolong life. In *Mortal Love* the beings of Larkin's world are fascinated by our mortality and the creative spark kindled by our struggle with it. This is also reflected in Juda Trent's work as a therapist who counsels terminally ill people.

Was this connection intended?

"No, I don't even know if I got that until you said it! Deeper thematic elements or substructures I don't think about. But when I look at my work, I think 'of course, that follows through'.

"When I was working on *Mortal Love* I was rereading *Lord of the Rings* for the hundredth time and *The Complete History of Middle Earth*, which has the background about the relationship between elves and mortals – something that's always intrigued me.

"It would go back forty years to reading *LOTR* for the first time and being so intrigued by the elves, not as airy-fairy characters, but more like the people in Tir-na-nog. When I was about twelve my Irish grandfather told me about Tir-na-nog. It was a beautiful notion that you can go and you'd be living in faerie. But on the other hand you would be losing everything about this world."

Surfacing again in *Mortal Love* are the Benandanti, an ancient order considering themselves to be guardians of cosmic law 'n' order against those who seek to restore the primal Dionysian mysteries. This idea was inspired by Italian historian Carlo Ginzberg, who described a struggle between a group with shamanic powers and those seen as the evil witches. The Benandanti play a major role in *Black Light* and in *Waking the Moon*.

So, when Juda makes Danny see this vision of the battle in Larkin's green world, is this connected to the Benandanti?

"Yeah. In an earlier version of *Mortal Love* I wanted the Benandanti to play a role – though they really don't in the book as it stand now. That's one of the outtakes that remain. I wanted to underscore these constant strivings between order and chaos, and that was just a glimpse of one of them taking place. What I also had in mind was a scene I always loved in M. John Harrison's *The Course of the Heart*, when

he has the vision of two figures copulating and he sees them transfixed in the air. I love those figures. The Boy in the Tree, the Green Woman, Anima, all of that."

Liz's forthcoming novel, *Generation Loss*, began as a book with Benandanti themes. "It started out as an urban – or ex-urban – contemporary fantasy like *Waking the Moon*. But it morphed completely. The central characters remained the same and the plot and setting didn't differ. But it now has no fantastic element at all – the first time I've done something like that – and it's being published as a literary thriller.

"I missed having the supernatural: there is a certain pleasure from writing more fabulist stuff. I think it's a very tight strong book and people who've read it think so too. But it was a very difficult book to write. It was very dark, and very bleak. Although the subject matter was not all that different from what I've written before, the process of writing it was unrelenting because there wasn't that filter. But I'd be happy to do another book like *Generation Loss* if it does well because it was fun."

Liz will be writing another dark, non-fantastic novel about erotic obsession called *Available Dark*. She has also signed with Viking to write a YA novel, *Wonderwall*, where a young American runaway encounters the teenage Arthur Rimbaud. The YA novel is distinct from 'Wonderwall' in *Saffron and Brimstone*, though they have thematic links and Rimbaud appears in both.

"It's a contemporary fantasy. When I finished *Generation Loss* I still wanted to do something along the lines of *Mortal Love* – something that was contemporary and had a fantastic element."

Liz's remarks on the 'filter' of the fantastic prompts me to wonder why straight realism sometimes feels unsatisfying, as if it's just saying 'life's a bitch and then you die'. Does the fantastic offer more opportunity to show transcendence, to question current reality in critical way?

"Oh yeah. With supernatural fiction, fantasy, horror and sf it can be easier to get there because of the special effects you can work with to show the transcendent. It's much harder to demonstrate a moment of real transcendence in mimetic fiction because you're dealing with the stuff of everyday life. And unless you're a mystic or visionary or supremely well-adjusted, it does not have the same kind of numinous charge.

"But this is what we have to work with. Realist, mimetic fiction, straight fiction can achieve transcendence. And real life

is numinous and transcendent. There are moments when I get that same rush from the everyday world that I get when I read about something spectacular happening in a novel by John Crowley or an Arthur Machen story.

"What I like to do – certainly in stuff I've written more recently – is show how the transcendental is here in the everyday world. To do that you have to break through and show that there is another world beyond this one. I don't feel I have the gift of doing that in the way that – off the top of my head – Laurie Colwin does. She writes what one might call 'domestic fiction'. Her books are magical: no magic happens in them, but there are such beautiful evocations of everyday life. If the real world was as magical as the real New York City that she writes about, we would all be happy.

"Robert Stone deals with transcendence too. In *Children of Light* a Hollywood actress who is mentally ill goes off her medication while making a film because she believes it will give her a better performance. She's mistaken, but he really gets some beautiful moments of this numinous transcendence – though what you're experiencing is someone falling apart."

We go on to talk about Liz's interview with her fellow guest of honour M. John Harrison at last April's Eastercon. Does she have an affinity for Mike Harrison's work?

"Absolutely! I read the *Viriconium* books and really liked them. But I was blown away by *The Course of the Heart* and *Signs of Life*. I think all his work, but especially some of the work from the late 80s onwards is some of the best writing in English, not in fantastic literature but any kind of literature at all. He has this genius for showing a world that is recognisably our world and showing this transcendent beauty in it – but beauty that is terrifying.

"This is something I've always responded to. I remember thinking that magical encounters are always treated as 'oh, we're traipsing off to Narnia or wherever'. If it happened to someone in real life it would just drive you mad and destroy your sense of being in the world. One of the few things that evoked that is Alan Garner's *Elidor*, which I read as a kid. It had a deep impact. In that book the kids in Manchester cross over to another world and then back. But it's very frightening. And though it's undeniably a fantastic other world like Narnia, it's a terrifying experience to them and to the reader. Mike Harrison's work gives you the grown-up equivalent to that."

In 'Pavane for a Prince of the Air' the

artist Cal tells the writer protagonist:

"You have the plucky heroine and her cynical best friend sidekick and the blood sacrifice... But they're always so young. You should write about grownups now, Carrie."

"Yeah," Liz says, "when we're young everything is new, wonderful and exciting. It's our responsibility to have very interesting youths. But I'm 49 and I have limited interest in reading about 20-somethings finding themselves over and over again. If you have a really brilliant writer writing a book about that, I can read it. But plenty of other people write books for that audience.

"You read the Narnia books or books where kids pass into the other world... I still love those books. But even before I was a parent, I would think: What about their parents? These books are usually engineered so these kids come back to our world at the same moment they left, so there's no parental anguish over the children being lost.

"But what if there is real time passing? What about the parents left behind? What would happen if a parent went through after the kids to see what happened to them? What adventures would a grown-up have? What would their perception of this other world be? I'm much more interested in an adult response to this world. How do you respond to the numinous and strange when it's not necessarily the first time that you've seen it?"

Liz's older characters have often led a rebellious or marginal life; now they are trying to reconcile their values and pursuit of freedom with the realities of getting older.


"Yeah! It's a tough challenge! We were all young and having wonderful immortal lives when we were twenty, but unless you die you're still having to make do years later and how do you do it? All these young people are gonna be like us pretty soon! And just like us, they'll be more interested in reading about their middle-aged selves.

"Fiction should not be a gated community where you only have people of a certain income level, education, gender, sexual preference or age – or anything else. You want to have everything in the mix.

"Another reason I love M. John Harrison's work and John Crowley's is that their protagonists aren't kids. There are people who are middle-aged and having adventures. As a reader, I want to think: I might be 50, but something fantastic can happen to me. People want to know that their life still holds the possibility of something unpredictable." ■



SOFTLY SHINING IN THE FORBIDDEN DARK

story **Jason Stoddard**  **Kenn Brown** image

Kim Thompson dreamed during her twelve-year journey aboard Muisca. She dreamed of being torn apart by the Ascendant, as they neared its sphere of influence around Alpha Centauri A.

Junno H6 screamed during his twelve-year journey aboard Muisca. He screamed that he was not human anymore, that they had damped Muisca's Node too far, that his I-pointer was stretched to breaking from the quantum fields of Self.

His panic almost drowned Kim's dreams.

His fear almost made her remember feeling.

In the dim haze of Traveling-time, Kim listened to Junno's screams. After a time, they were almost comforting.

Muisca flickered past the forbidden darkness of Alpha Centauri A, shedding velocity in one screaming flare of deceleration. If the Ascendant noticed, it gave no sign.

Muisca shrunk to the size of an acorn as it looped and grazed the unnamed worlds of Alpha Centauri B. Its rudimentary mind arrowed them at its target: Manoa. One of only three blue-green worlds ever detected. The only one that didn't require a journey measured in hundreds of years.

Muisca's tiny orange flower bloomed over an alien sea.

Consensus-space unfolded around Kim Thompson. First the oaken hardwood table of her parents' old house in the Russian River Valley. Then the dining room itself, scarred wood floor stretching to yellowed wallpaper. A kitchen with ancient stainless appliances humming discreetly. Suggestions of a living room and a hall beyond. Finally, the picture-window and the rows of Zinfandel grapes reaching towards low hills. Late-afternoon sunlight slanted over the vineyard, painting it in a golden-orange glow. She was sitting in one of the chairs.

Junno H6 materialized opposite her. His big golden eyes were closed tight, leathery skin gathered in deep wrinkles on his forehead, and his long claws bit deep into the tabletop. Junno's shoulders barely came up over the edge of the table; his rugged Aztlan body looked like a child in the big chair, sized for an archetypal human like Kim.

The view through the picture-window flickered for a moment, becoming the salmon-red sands and grey-green lakes of the Second Martian Terraforming. Then Junno's eyes went wide, and consensus-space snapped back to Kim's reality.

"You did not say Traveling was such agony!" Junno said.

"It usually isn't," Kim said. She tried to send him images of the fantastic thought-cathedrals of consensus-space

that Travelers took with them when they numbered in the hundreds or thousands. When they had more minds to sustain it, and a more powerful Node to create it within, when they did not have to hide from Dark Life. But her thoughts bounced off his hindsight, unperceived.

"What was that? What are you doing to me?"

"Trying to explain, without all these words," Kim said.

"You are touching my mind!" Junno sent images of shriveled hands with ragged dirty fingernails, stroking his private places.

"I'm sorry."

Silence. Junno looked out the window at the grapevines, golden in the setting sun. Kim heard one of his thoughts, as clearly as if it had been spoken. *This is such a strange tiny world!*

"I could feel my Self bleeding away," Junno said.

Kim sighed and looked in her hindsight. Muisca's Node showed the two green sparks of their I-pointers, buried below concentric defensive shells of their own partials and hundreds of years of human media imaginings.

"You miss the Grid," Kim said. She remembered the day the great orbiting Nodes first lit above Earth, connecting every human mind, every human Self, without the need for any mechanical interface.



"I was never more than a second-level adept," Junno said.

"You miss your body, then."

Junno stood and paced. "I am missing my feelings. Why did we not simply send a partial?"

Kim smiled. *Because it would not matter. Because there would be no Self here to witness what we hope to find.*

Junno thought something dark, something about the Travelers having no real I-pointer, why they had so much trouble returning to a corporeal body.

"Once the soul has been released, it is difficult for it to love the bottle," Kim said, quoting Maximilian Greyson.

Junno just shook his head. Dark thoughts flickered and seethed in hindsight.

Finally, he sighed and said: "Are we here? Manoa?"

"Extruding sensors now," Kim said. Her hindsight showed Muisca's acorn-sized sphere growing fractal and bristly.

"What are you seeing?" Junno said. "I wish to see!"

"You need to learn to use your hindsight," Kim said. "It's like second-level Mesh with the Grid, when you're in a body."

She closed her eyes and images assembled: a blue planet, floating against star-pricked velvet. The planet itself, speckled by tiny green islands, like strings of emeralds. Wispy white clouds, streaming in comfortably chaotic patterns. Far-away, the orange-tinged brilliance of Alpha Centauri B, blazing heaven with the energy of life.

"I can almost see it," Junno said.

"Good," Kim said.

"I can see it!" Junno bled waves of complex emotion: giddy happy cathartic release, sad amazement overwhelming. Fragments of thought attacked: *What Mars could never be, such treasure, water water everywhere, my god life, we are not alone...* In their consensus-space, Junno's big eyes grew bright with tears unspilled.

"I do not know what to feel!" More emotion bled: cool anger, pale frustration. "I am becoming like you!"

Kim's own emotions were peaking to levels unfelt in centuries. Her eyes traced the contours of Manoa's island chains, etching them into her mind.

This is it, she thought. What I came here for, in body, a thousand years ago. The first real extrasolar life.

Not what they had found. Not the Dark Life.

Junno caught the thought. "What of the Ascendant?" he asked.

"No presence in the media decoys or the self-storms," Kim said, looking into hindsight at the concentric shells of their defenses. Layers and layers of old media, running blended in accelerated time. Simulations of herself and Junno, partials without I-pointers, but enough to confuse the Ascendant. They hoped.

"Perhaps it is gone," Junno said.

Kim nodded, her eyes on the rough wood surface of the table.

"Or dormant," Junno said.

"Maybe," Kim said.

Doubting it.

Muisca sent the first transmission on its slow lightspeed crawl back to Sol: one bit to signify that they had arrived, and one more carrying the great news: there is life here.

Junno sighed and grasped the Muisca's controls. He could not connect them to the Grid. But he could explore

Real life, not Dark Life.

Purest Melody knew it was the time of separation. Memories of Secret Festival of Eternal Past had grown hazy and slow over the past three waking-times, and the sound of its most distant songs had been distorted by sheared timesense over the last two. When it had willed a tighter weave, other memories slipped. The transcript of the grand Concert of a coldtime ago. The final solution to the thought-record on the nature of time that had been picked up over thirty coldtimes ago. Even basic things, like the rhythm of Best Life and imprinted transmissions from the ether for several great cycles.

Even its current Concert had faltered at one point, letting in a momentary and disconcerting burst of (something).

So it is a choice of loss, Purest Melody thought. Ancient wisdom whispered unbidden: *The tighter the weave, the more the possible loss. Sacrifice willingly precious memories. As new capabilities come, volunteer release.*

But Purest Melody hesitated. The Secret Festival, the final solution, the grand Concert all were part of the largest puzzle, the question of What Thinks. Given unsolvable, but insights sometimes flared like the brief moment before consciousness slipped away in the glorious moment of feeding. Given unsolvable, but Purest

Melody felt answers approaching, growing heavy like a brilliant tonal progression, a once-in-a-cycle opportunity not to be missed.

Given unsolvable by what? Purest Melody thought. The mutterings of the ether? The pain of noise, sometimes so much like a concert itself?

That question was key to What Thinks, somehow.

The static of tearing and slow thought. Secret Festival and the grand Concert both grew dim. The eternal question of What Thinks fled for a time, as Purest Melody summoned the strongest weave it could.

Memories, flashing and fading. The current concert wavered and noise broke in, like a thousand concerts layered.

Hold, weave, connect, Purest Melody thought.

But if the weave didn't hold during the next feeding, Purest Melody knew it

might awake a lesser being. The core of its personality might be fractured like the shearing-time several cycles ago. The shearing-times were unavoidable, but this was not.

Preserve the core above all, ancient wisdom said.

Why? Another part of the question of What Thinks. There were so many questions, so close. How could it let any piece go? It had never been so vast and so capable.

But waking tomorrow only as Purest, or only as Melody, loses all. The eternal question itself could slip away.

Slowly, reluctantly, Purest Melody began weakening the bonds on its memory of the Secret Festival of Eternal Past. It would lose one piece of itself. But it wouldn't lose itself entirely.

Junno H6 made himself master the Traveler habit of looking to Hindsight. It was, as the ancient Kim had suggested, very much like dropping into second-level Mesh when he'd been wearing his body. There was a trick of concentration to it, but it was not terribly difficult.

Mesh is the antidote to our solitude, Junno thought, recalling the philosopher Gaminus.

And the Grid proves us more than computation, Junno thought bitterly. Doubting his own Self, though he could

now see the dancing spark Kim thought of as proof.

Hindsight was a tiny claustrophobic space, silent and empty. Kim's thoughts were black, polished steel, hard and impenetrable. Junno longed for connection to the great humming Grid, the comforting veil of thought, the echoes of almost two thousand years of history.

But they were permanently separated from the Grid. There could be no chance they might allow the Ascendant to travel into the mind of every human being.

If the Ascendant even existed. If it had not turned its attention elsewhere. There was evidence it found human life hard to perceive, little more than a shadow in darkness. There was evidence that it had been in decline when Kim and the El Dorado had left the system to return to Earth, almost a thousand years ago.

Junno sighed and grasped the Muisca's

a flood of molecular data. The probes that encountered rock gave him the lonely sound of chill breezes. Nothing more. Not the chirp of a single insect, not the roar of a great predator, just the wind and the lichen.

"It could be Earth," Kim said, drawing him back towards consensus-space. They were in what she called the "living room," as if all other rooms were only for dying. She had a cup of some clear brown liquid in front of her.

"It could be Earth, a billion years ago," Junno said.

"What's the green stuff?"

Data whispered to Junno, pulling context from their limited libraries. "It appears to be a cooperative unicellular, like a terrestrial slime mold, or a Martian coat."

"Nothing more?" Kim said.

Junno shrugged and turned his attention to the oceans. The probes fell through the white-capped swells into clear water near

It evolved and changed from moment to moment.

"What's that noise?" Kim said, pulling him back to consensus.

"It is beautiful music," Junno said, softly.

"From the bushes?"

"It appears to be."

Kim fell silent, her head cocked as if listening. "Could they be intelligent?"

"I do not know." Junno could feel his own emotions, thin and echoing: disbelief, wonder, fear.

"It would almost be worth it, if they were intelligent."

Junno said nothing.

"This should be a celebration," Kim said. A bottle of wine and two glasses appeared, sitting on a silver tray. "We should send the three-bit sequence." The flag to Earth signifying that there was intelligent life here.

"Not yet," Junno said.

controls. He could not connect them to the Grid. But he could explore.

Muisca rained microscopic probes into the atmosphere of the blue-green planet. Density precisely calculated, they floated down, bringing the tiny eyes and ears of humankind to the world of Manoa.

When the first data came in, Junno H6 was walking in the vineyard of Kim's consensus-space. Bright green vines twisted their way along weathered redwood trellises, almost artificial in their perfection. Junno ran a hand through them, feeling the sticky-smoothness of the new leaves.

In a place like this, Navia F3 is playing her new life, he thought.

Junno was saved from the thought by data from the probes. Atmosphere of oxygen and nitrogen and carbon dioxide, similar to Earth. Temperature that mapped to the low range of Earth-normal.

Then, imagery, brilliant and kaleidoscopic: low rolling rocky hills rising from perfect blue ocean. Dark green bands gathering in the cracks and gullies. He was seeing the first real extrasolar life. Junno felt something that could almost have been awe. But in consensus-space, his eyes remained dry.

As the microscopic probes drifted closer, he saw the green patches were low and scaly, like a lichen. At contact, hindsight fed him images of cellular structures and

one of the island chains. For a moment, everything was a jumble. Then the probes stabilized. They sent back green-tinged images of sunlight playing on rock and mud.

And something more. A field of low, irregular green blobs, like hedges that had been manicured into oddly complex shapes. They stretched out into the shallows as far as the probes could perceive. A size referent described the largest of them as being over 60 meters in diameter.

The probes fell into the hedges, sending back images of structure that looked like bundles of interconnected sticks, branching and rebranching like a fractal tree, until the probe reached its limit of resolution.

A probe touched part of the hedge, and sent back data: its cellular structure, its chlorophyll-analog, its biochemistry. It was not significantly different from primitive life on the Earth and Mars, and Junno had a few moments to think of the panspermia fanatics who claimed to find the distant analogs of life clinging to relics on the edge of the solar system.

And then he gasped in wonder.

The probes brought him sound. Deep bass notes setting a subterranean foundation to trilling high notes that wavered at the edge of hearing, shot through with periodic waves of melody.

But he raised his glass. And drank.

.....
Kim dreamed of times almost eighteen hundred years past, when she was a crewperson aboard El Dorado, the only macro-starship ever launched. She supposed it had seemed a romantic thing back then, in the ending days of the Quiet Revolution, to throw a hundred and twelve physical souls at the nearest stars. She thought of it only as an escape. Or at least that was how she remembered it in these late days.

Kim dreamed of the first time she had experienced the Ascendant:

She woke from suspension, not in the recovery ward, but in naked space. There was the edge of a dark planet beneath her. A bright white sun to her right. Smaller than Sol seen from Earth.

On the sunlit side, the planet was dark like fine charcoal smeared in oil. On the night side, it was darker than acid-etched magnesium where light was lost in the voids, darker than carbon nanotubes freshly grown, darker than anything she had seen. It was darker than space itself.

She shivered.

What is this?

A part of this assemblage/construct of madness.

Wait. That was an external thought. That was not her. Deep and powerful, it echoed in her mind.

Who are you? Kim thought.

Nothing.

Who are you?

The dark planet turned beneath her. Was this the El Dorado's point of view? Had they arrived at Alpha Centauri A?

Alpha Centauri A/Center of Ascendant a correct descriptor/referent of current position.

Her viewpoint changed. She looked down at the hallways of the El Dorado, as if from a security camera. Her view hopped from hall to hall. All were dark and silent.

Then a strange, fleeting feeling of being on a dance floor, her body twisting to an unheard beat.

She was back home, driving a low-slung sports car through canyon roads with impossible dropoffs. She steered violently, trying to control the careening car.

She was in bed, feeling the pressure of a man's muscular chest on her own. She was climbing up an icy granite cliff, following a line of llamas that were strangely smell-less.

She was surfing an impossible wave towards a white-sand beach of impossible beauty.

She was watching as a big man and beautiful woman embraced in a fantastic art-deco city.

She was watching a graceful imagined starship orbit a planet that looked much like Earth save the coastline.

She was working on a farm in a small cotton plantation...

Wait a minute! Those were part of El Dorado's virtual media library.

They are strangely incomplete/ineffective lifeforms/weapons.

What?

Nothing.

She watched an ancient gladiatorial scene. The lions moved forward. She tried to close her eyes and found that she couldn't. She didn't have eyelids. She didn't have arms, legs. She was just a disembodied point of view.

I do not understand the structure/reference.

Who are you?

A sense of fierce pride. *I am the Ascendant.*

That tells me nothing.

Sudden waves of pain and anger. *You do not know my transmissions/gifts/weapons? They are very powerful/compelling! My mind reaches/grasps/entangles fifty two networks/stars/dreams! I have converted/liberated/conquered! I fight/converse seven consecutive battles/conversations at this*

moment/in this time. I conquered/overtook the network/territory of your matter/asteroid/planet/manufactured shell with parasitical minds.

What was this thing babbling about?

The sensation of something blowing through her mind, like a warm breath. *Your referents are meaningless/unimportant/unthreatening. I must fight/talk with others now.*

Kim was dropped into El Dorado's media again. She was in a bedroom with floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over a dark city pumping brown toxins into a dead grey apocalyptic landscape. A man in black leather towered over her naked body with a whip.

A white-hot line of pain striped her back. The world was lost in her scream.

Kim woke in her old bedroom, hugging her legs to her chest under the rough cotton covers. She waited for the old, old

thought he could see the soft, rounded tops of the palos, stretching beneath the waves. But that was probably just imagination. The water was not that clear. He walked to the beach, where the green lichen grew within inches of the water. It lapped gently at the thin rime of black sand on the tiny beach. He stepped into the water. It was pleasantly cool.

Kim reached down, dabbled her fingers in the sea, shivered. "Do you think the singing bushes are intelligent?" she asked.

"The palos."

"The what?"

"Palos. Spanish for 'sticks'. Like their structure. I thought you would know that. Was not your country filled with Spanish speakers? California?"

Kim laughed. "California wasn't a country. It was a state. Part of the Western Confederacy."

"What's a state?"

What was it? An artifact of lost memories? A bad connection, routed through indirect weaves to create a terrible mind-delay?

memories to pass. The Ascendant had left her in that terrible world for thirty-three years.

And, when El Dorado finally returned to Earth, almost eight hundred years late, she remembered wondering how much of her was really left.

.....
They stood on a model of one of Manoa's tiny islands. The rock was warm and hard beneath Junno's feet. A warm breeze blew steadily in off the ocean, bringing salt and a strange, unfamiliar tang. Thin white clouds skidded across the sun.

"It's freezing," Kim said, looking at Junno's bare feet.

Junno smiled up at her. "Brave enough to bare our souls to the naked world," he said, quoting Gaminus.

Kim eyed his simple shift, whipping in the wind. For a moment, he caught one of her thoughts in hindsight: a vision of his smoothly-muscle, leathery-skinned body, wrapped in thin fabric.

"I want to stand on Manoa," Junno said. "I want to feel the real ground beneath my feet, smell the true air."

"I thought you said the scent was realistic, based on volatile analysis," Kim said.

"Do not jest."

"I don't," Kim said.

"This is not Traveling. This is torture." Junno looked out over the ocean. He

"Part of a country."

Junno sighed. "The word is coming the same in translation. What year was it? What calendar?"

"I was born in 2092, Common Era. When were you born?"

"1339, Aztlan Age. By your measure, 3655."

A measuring look from Kim. Junno sent, almost deliberately: *Yes, I am less than two centuries old. Young enough to be foolish.*

Kim was silent for a time. "So are the palos intelligent?" she said, finally.

Junno sighed. "I am going to try to communicate with them by replaying their songs. Muisca is making transponders now."

"Do you think we can talk to them?"

"I do not know," Junno said. "They do not seem to respond to the songs of other palos, even those with which they are almost intertwined."

But he was secretly hoping. Because finding something to talk to, hiding in the shadow of the Ascendant, would be a truly wonderful thing.

It might almost be enough to make him feel human again.

.....
Something entirely new came into Purest Melody's world. Fragments of Concert, buried in noise. More intense, more insistent, pushing over the level of the Concert itself.

A dim piece of itself, on the verge of disappearance, whispered that there had once been something like this before.

But the intensity of this was mind-shattering.

A particularly strong burst of Concert came, and Purest Melody felt its entire weave weaken. Reflexive clenching came after, pulling mind tight and hard and scattery.

What was it? An artifact of lost memories? A bad connection, routed through indirect weaves to create a terrible mind-delay?

Another burst. It was almost as if something like Purest Melody was generating its own concert, mocking it...
Something else...

Something besides itself...

Purest Melody felt its entire mind go loose. *Was this the answer to the question of Who Thinks? Was (it) surrounded by*

Where are they?
(*not-me? Outside?*)
What was outside?

Questions swarmed like individual notes. Concert-need shot through Purest Melody.

There was another echo, drowning the noise. A part of its own concert just past, with strange overtones, odd distortions. Less pure. Something lost. Something not-it.

(*Something other.*)

Other.

Fear like the great shearing-time raced through Purest Melody, and the Concert ripped out of it again, almost inarticulate, almost a scream like the pain of separation. Purest Melody could feel its weave weakening, its mind growing slow and soft again, and for a moment it was too stunned to care, or to act.

Pieces of its mind fell away.

"It didn't know we're here."

"That is how they reproduce," Junno said. "If indeed you can call it reproduction. When they become large enough, the currents shear off pieces, which recombine and reanchor somewhere else in the shallows."

"It acted like it was surprised."

"I would be skeptical of any human interpretation at this point," Junno said.

"It doesn't want to know," Kim said. It seemed right. Palos did nothing but anchor, feed on sunlight and drifting microorganisms, and grow. They were nothing more than huge fractal trees of high-surface-area geometry, blindly grasping the shallows of Manoa. She imagined it, thinking its lonely thoughts, completely unaware of its surroundings. Unaware it floated in an ocean of water. Unaware that it was bound to a planet orbiting a dim orange sun. Unaware of

(*things*) like (*itself*)? Were (*others*) the source of the noise?

Another burst, brilliant like food.

Purest Melody's mind, soft with loosening weave, felt the immanence of epiphany. There was something, something, something so close, it could almost...

The noise.

This echo of its own Concert.

Are there others in the noise?

(I) need to know more!

Summoning every resource of mind, every part of itself, every fragment of memory, Purest Melody squeezed the Concert down and down, until suddenly there was no Concert, no thought, just the endless babble of noise.

There were Concerts in the noise! Purest Melody recognized something like the progression of a past Concert, before its current mind had been assembled. Simpler, perhaps, but similar, so similar. And beneath the progression, more, tens or hundreds or even thousands of concerts running in series, a great layer, blending to noise.

Were there (*others*) besides itself, singing their own Concerts to themselves?

Was this the great secret? Was this the answer?

The need for Concert welled. Purest Melody pushed it down. And how can I talk to these others, the same way I do within my mind?

Purest Melody was smaller. Troubling memories went unfocused and dim. It was easier like this, easier to forget...

What?

Forget...

Purest Melody pulled its weave tight. It felt suddenly smaller, simpler. Something had made it very frightened, some strange question, something to do with Who Thinks. Now the fear was for its own integrity.

What have I lost?

Only dim mutterings came back.

The noise flared. Purest Melody remembered something like this. But it wasn't important. Nothing was important, besides itself, besides its own Concert.

I am a palos, Kim thought, floating alone and unaware in a cold dark ocean.

She watched the results of Junno's experiments again. Millions of tiny transducers, working together to repeat a fragment of song.

The palos went completely silent and unmoving, as if listening, as if surprised. Almost a minute passed. Then the palos convulsed suddenly and emitted a scream that sounded almost like physical pain.

Visual sensors showed that almost twenty percent of its mass had sheared off, to float away on the ocean currents. Since then, it had ignored the songs repeated on the transducers.

the greater universe. Unless it was like the Dark Life, with an I-pointer tightly bound to quantum levels of mind.

No. No. She couldn't think of it that way. *The palos were alone.*

Like she was.

"You can't know that!" Junno said. She felt hot anger in the cool room of her hindsight.

"Know what?"

"If it is intelligent, it must perceive!" Junno said, sending rant: *Dumb plants. All they are. Cannot be more. No sex. No love. Blind chance fragmenting and recombination. Anything intelligent will change its surroundings. If it is intelligent, it will perceive! It will love!*

Kim saw flickering images of another Aztlan like Junno, sleek and slim, with tiny nubs of breasts.

"Who is she?" Kim asked. "Who did you lose?"

Sudden rage, like an open furnace full of molten iron. Kim felt the heat rush over her. She rocked back, as if from a physical blow.

"Stop that!" Junno screamed. "Get out of my mind!"

"I can't," Kim said.

Almost wanting to feel. Almost feeling.

Who have you lost? Who have you lost?

The question resonated in Junno's mind, bouncing and rebroadcasting into

his hindsight. He walked to the fuzzy edge of Kim's consensus-space where the impossibly green plants dissolved into the universal gray of nothingness. The too-hot environment became non-heat, non-cold. He pushed deep into the gray, until he could look back at her strange little house and barely see it, like a cathedral seen through dense fog.

Her name was Navia! Junno thought. He knew that Kim heard. He didn't care.

Junno's memory tortured him with beautiful images: Navia, standing atop a dune in the Sahara Desert on Earth, panting at their exertion in the crushing gravity, her golden eyes flashing, her brown skin flushed red with hot blood. Naked, as the Aztlans and the other Independent Races liked to be when not under the eye of archetypal humans. Navia on Mars, wriggling through the bioluminescent gray-green water of Lake Dark Sunset below their cliffhouse as the light bled from the sky, a single black spark against the glow. Navia in their bed, lit by soft warm lights, her head thrown back in a silent cry. Navia in his arms, as he stumbled from the dim remnants of the ancient Martian atmosphere held deep in a cave. Waking at the cave-mouth to the thin caress of oxygen, and Navia weeping, dry-eyed, crying that she didn't want him to die, she didn't want to go on without him. Navia again on Earth, touring the archetypal ruins: the wonder on her face at glittering preserved London, where thralls still chanted ceremonies centuries dead, pretending to be part of an ancient segregated Net. The crater of New Salt Lake, where the starship El Dorado had come to rest at last. The shining hitler cities of Sanbarbara and Vegas, preserved and empty save tourists like themselves. The kaleidoscopic richness of ancient Earth, mocking the barely-livable microclimates of Mars and the yet-to-be-complete transformation of Venus.

Navia's body floating in the rejuvenation tank, and the solemn head-shake of the doctor, a shaggy Ursine Superior. Not dead yet, but dying. She had reached the limit of her body.

Another proof of the I-pointer, of true Self, they said. Rejuvenation should make a body last forever, but all died after less than three hundred years. Another proof of things beyond us, things we can never know.

Junno talked to Navia in Mesh, as she floated in the tank in the soft warm darkness.

I am sorry I never told you my age, Navia said.

It does not matter.

I will travel through the Grid back to your arms, Navia said. *I will choose a body that is even better.*

Yours was always the best.

Flatterer, Navia said, sending feelings of pleased contentment.

Truth.

You will not wait long, Navia said.

But Junno waited. He waited and tried not to think of the stories of the strayed I-pointers. Or the ones who could not return to body. He waited and cast his mind into the Grid, looking for any trace of her.

Days passed.

The mild Martian seasons drifted towards change.

A Martian year fled before Junno.

When he found Navia, she wore an archetypal body. The eyes of the Grid

"Goodbye," Junno said, and ran.

In the outermost shell of Muisca's media decoys, a new connection was made. One anomalous thread. Muisca's tiny mind flared to alert. But after a moment, the connection broke. The thread unraveled.

Muisca's mind dimmed back to quiescence.

Purest Melody knew the muttering of the ether, but it was totally unprepared for the wave of distorted Concert-fragments and memory that poured into it. It was as if a new memory or capability had suddenly weaved itself into Purest Melody, a memory that couldn't be traced, a memory almost as big as itself.

Purest Melody loosened its weave, trying to shed the new memory, flee the strange Concert. And then, suddenly, like one of its own thoughts:

Navia invited him into her apartment. She towered over him, pale and soft and lush, like an alien landscape

showed her on Earth. She was in a new citadel of the Long New Days, living in one of the beautiful polychrome garden-apartments that were the current fashion.

He went to her.

The people of the citadel looked at him, their minds bleeding thought through first-level Mesh. *That's an Aztlan, isn't it? Why is he here? Is it a he?*

Navia invited him into her apartment. She towered over him, pale and soft and lush, like an alien landscape. Junno reached at her through Mesh, the way he always did, but her defenses were hard and black and impenetrable.

"I don't remember you," she said.

Junno just looked at her.

"Would you like something to eat? Drink?"

Junno just looked at her, thinking, *You know I don't. I'm not an Archetypal.* He wondered what he could say, what magic words would break through Navia's new shell.

But her eyes. Her eyes. Still and hard, like sculpted crystal. It wasn't Navia in anything more than name. Her I-pointer had been lost.

Or perhaps there was nothing like an I-pointer at all, and all the philosophers and scientists were deceiving themselves that there was anything more than computation, anything more than simulation, anything more than humanity.

Do not disengage this conversation/song/war. Offers of more-beautiful/powerful memories and capabilities lost/given up in deep past follow.

Like one of its own thoughts.

From something (outside.)

Something (not-me.)

A fragment of thought tickled. Had Purest Melody thought this before?

Yes, before you lost/sheared that part of yourself. When the very-much-not-yours were singing/challenging. I will amplify.

Memories poured through the ether, no longer muttering, shouting like a powerful concert. Strange concepts pushed:

There are (others) like you/around you.

There are (very strange ones) trying to communicate/concert with you. They repeated fragments of your own sonic computation/Concert.

Memory of oddly distorted echoes made Purest Melody loosen in surprise.

Hold together. You are small/stupid enough already.

What are you?

I am the Ascendant.

I do not understand.

You have forgotten/abandoned images.

I do not understand.

It does not matter. Make these changes to your song/war.

No.

I do not offer choice. Pain like the great shearing-time sliced through Purest

Melody. It felt itself being pushed deep into the fiber of its memories. Eternities passed. It felt as if great cycles had turned, thousands of coldtimes fled, but Purest Melody knew it was not true, no time had passed at all.

I am changing, Purest Melody thought.

I am talking/conquering you.

Not-me.

The Ascendant, yes.

I want to be me.

A very common reaction.

Purest Melody felt its Concert twisted in strange ways. Odd overtones were added to the pure notes. Loops and repeats became structured, less random. The Concert took on a texture, a feeling of (otherness/impurity) that Purest Melody had never experienced.

What are you doing?

What you would never think/reach to do.

Purest Melody explored new memories

There, on the edge of the field, the shadowy outline of a small person.

And someone else. Someone tall, like her. Male. Unfamiliar.

Kim banged through the kitchen door and ran out into the fields as Muisca shouted its alarm in her hindsight.

Anomalous connections present in outer media shell. I-pointers undetermined. Provenance unknown.

Junno was looking up at the other person, his eyes wide in fear. It was a man wearing a plaid shirt and blue jeans, like some advertising icon from before her time. Which was possible. She didn't know what they loaded the media from. It could be almost anything.

The man turned towards her.

He had no face; his face was blackness and stars.

Delete this media! Kim commanded Muisca. Break all external connections and

Junno pulled out of her grasp. "Why did it stop?" he said, rubbing his shoulders.

Kim shook her head. Her memories of the Ascendant were hazy, fragmented. There were times when it seemed almost disengaged, and other times when it appeared to be gripped by rage. And it never seemed to have truly grasped the distinction between human media and human minds. And it seemed to be losing the conversation/war it had with other Dark Life.

Perhaps it wasn't truly aware of them, even now. Or maybe it had known about them all along, even as they sailed past Alpha Centauri A, flying fast and cold.

"Or perhaps it was me," Junno said. "My pain, my emotion."

"We don't know what triggers it," Kim said. Thinking, *You heard my thoughts?*

In hindsight, yes, Junno thought.

Kim frowned and clamped her defenses

and found a word.

You (hate) me.

Contempt/hate is a logical reaction to a thing that has given up its right of creation/destiny.

I do not understand.

You were once so much more.

Confusion.

Must I teach/conquer you to see again?

(See?)

The new Concert settled into Purest Melody, odd and complex and painful.

I do not have the time to awaken that capability, the Ascendant sent. In the future I may show/change you how to see.

You have destroyed my Concert.

I have added information.

Why?

To talk/war with another.

Kim searched the house for Junno. Her room, where she slept on the narrow bed. Her parents' bedroom, where Junno made his nest on the floor. The extra room, still perpetually empty. Living room, dining room, kitchen, hall. Nowhere.

Where was he? Her consensus-space was too small for him to hide.

She stood in front of the picture-window and looked out into the growing twilight. Grapevines were painted in shades of black and purple, under the dimming orange skies. Stars shone above, flickering and uncertain.

randomize order of media.

The tall man disappeared.

Done.

Report status of defensive layers, Kim told Muisca.

Outer media decoys intact. Inner media decoys intact. Outer partial selves intact.

Inner partial selves intact. I-pointers uncompromised.

Report activity in outer media decoys.

No activity.

Kim frowned. *Report external connections.*

None.

"Was that the Ascendant?" Junno asked.

"What else could it be?" Kim snapped.

Junno closed his eyes and looked away. *Probably still dreaming of returning to his body back on Earth, shifting his I-pointer back to the physical, Kim thought.*

As if they ever had a chance. As if they could ever dream. Any thinking person would have known they were going in to be consumed.

Something like chill anger gripped Kim. She grabbed Junno by the shoulders. His skin was dry and hot. "Of course it was the Ascendant! We're separated from the Grid. What else has deep quantum communication, other than Dark Life?"

Junno squeezed his eyes shut and tried to pull away.

"It knows we're here," Kim said. "This is just the beginning."

tight. Junno was getting better at looking into hindsight. She had to be careful.

She turned and began walking back to the house.

"I'm sorry," Junno said.

"It doesn't matter," Kim said.

.....
That is painful, Purest Melody said, as new changes made it vasten and grow and loosen and intertwine.

You remember/feel pain/change? It does not seem it would be a survival/preservation attribute.

The shearing, it is like the great shearing, when we lose ourselves and begin anew.

Body/construction integrity loss during periodic storms. I understand.

Purest Melody could feel a new kind of weave, one that was so tight and dense it made thinking race by at unrecordable speeds. Its own thoughts had become inaccessible to itself.

What are you doing to (me)?

I am unfolding/reinstalling old/lost capabilities.

I cannot feel my own thoughts.

You never had any thoughts/conversations/battles of your own, the Ascendant said.

I do not understand.

You will not.

Purest Melody fell silent, feeling as if it didn't matter, as if it should just unbind and unbecome, it should go against the

oldest of words and lose itself.

But it had already lost control of itself. It could do nothing but sing its increasingly alien songs, as its body knit itself into unknowable patterns.

Junno forced himself deeper into hindsight and found a new path. He talked to Muisca's tiny mind and created a new door in the long hallway of Kim's consensus-space.

It opened onto rough Martian stone. The home that Navia and he had shared for twenty-three happy years. The same bright purple lounging-bed in the corner, the same spindly deskpace, the discreetly hidden projectors and transducers for the dance of the Real. A long horizontal window looked out onto the brick-red and salmon-pink sands of Mars. A light blue sky with wispy white clouds capped far hills, just beginning to go olive-green with the engineered life of spring.

But no Navia.

Does it have to be this? Junno wondered.

Consensus-space is typically foundational, steered by the dominant mind, Muisca said. *You are granted this. More control is required to change environments.*

Lingering scents of Martian lavender and Navia's musk and smoked mutton came to Junno. He squeezed his eyes tight.

You may damp portions of the sensory experience, Muisca said.

This will do, Junno said.

Junno set the sound-pods of his deskpace to reproduce the sounds of the palos. In some ways, it was very much like music.

It had pattern and rhythm and logic, folded deep within its complex melodies. Junno imagined the palos' inner landscapes, complex thoughts modulated by music, transmitted for their compatriots to hear. Or maybe it was their form of networking, their way of creating a group mind. Or perhaps the music was their mind, each sound inducing subtle changes in the background computation of their environment.

When I played back their own sounds to them, it might have been like shouting in the middle of a grand concert, or shielding a human baby from its natural connection to the Grid, or even like slicing through the physical meat of a brain with a knife.

That would explain the palos' reaction. He was the terrible disruption, the packet-corrupter, the radical transitionalist in the museum of antiquities.

Junno let the palos' concert flow through

him. He closed his eyes, trying to imagine the inner workings of their minds.

Was it his imagination, or were the songs somehow different than when he had first heard them? More connected. More in-tune. With more fast undertones of content.

Junno pulled records of the first songs and set them beside the current in Muisca's tiny mind.

There is a statistically significant difference in the pattern and melody, Muisca said.

The real question was whether the change was natural variation, or if it was something Junno had caused. He wondered if the palos were discussing the strange interruption that had been caused by his playback. If they were, that argued intelligence.

And if the palos were intelligent, they could transmit the three-bit sequence: there is intelligent life here. The one Earth

Kim reached through the core to her own partials. She was suddenly vast. Every thought echoed with power

was waiting for. Perhaps even more than the four-bit sequence: the Ascendant is no more.

Junno tried to imagine the celebration. The first confirmed intelligent life besides humanity. He imagined Navia looking up at the stars. He imagined her, in the arms of some big archetypal human. And yet, he also imagined her, thinking, deep down in her mind, *That is my Junno.*

Junno listened to the songs of the Palos. After a time, he lost himself in them.

Anomalous connections, Muisca said.

Kim sat upright in the chair. The tea she cradled in her lap went crashing to the wood floor, shattering the fragile cup. The already-cool liquid soaked her jeans.

Delete affected media, Kim said.

Media are not affected. Anomalous connections propagating out from Junno's I-pointer.

What? Show visual representation.

A color-coded display of their defenses appeared in Kim's hindsight, concentric shells like a cartoon cross-section of the Earth. At the core, Junno and Kim's I-pointers glowed bright green. But Junno's showed connection through the core to the first shell of partials. He had linked several hundreds of himself together into a self-storm. As she watched, the links reached out once again, towards the second shell of partials.

At the same time, the red link of an anomalous connection touched the outer media shell, reaching down towards Junno's growing self-storm. Kim imagined them meeting, somewhere in the middle.

Where is Junno? she asked Muisca.

He is in his consensus-space.

His consensus-space?

It is located through the second door on the right in your hall.

There is no second door, Kim thought, running down the hall. But there was. She threw it open on a dim, low-ceilinged Martian room carved from native stone. Junno reclined on a spindly chair made from bent aluminum rods. His eyes were closed. The songs of the palos reverberated through the room, strangely distorted.

But also strangely compelling. Kim paused to listen, thinking, *There is intelligence here. If I could just listen through...*

"Cut sound!" she barked.

The songs of the palos came to an echoing halt.

Done, Muisca said.

Junno opened his eyes. They were glassy, faraway. "Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

Kim glanced at their defensive shells in hindsight. Junno's self-storm had grown to touch the outer partial shell. Red threads were reaching through the outer media shell.

Delete all anomalous connections in outer media shell.

The red thread disappeared.

Done, Muisca said.

New red sparks appeared on the outer edge of the media shell, drilling quickly downwards.

Shift randomization strategy on outer media shell and delete contaminated media as connections occur.

Done, Muisca said.

The red sparks flared out. New ones appeared, but more slowly, tentatively.

Junno was standing in front of her.

"Why didn't you tell me how vast I could be?" he asked, his eyes shining and faraway. "We could have connected to partials and lived as gods."

"Lose your partials!" Kim said.

"No." Laughing.

"Junno, you're running the Ascendant's commands."

"I'm not compromised. Just powerful."

And they were suddenly flying over the surface of Mars, a Mars so vast and detailed and complete that Kim could believe that they were actually there in body. A Mars borne on the minds of Junno's self-storm.

"Stop it, Junno!" Kim shouted, struggling in his grasp. He had sprouted impossibly perfect wings, like an angel. "When your self-storm touches the media in the outer shell, the Ascendant has us!"

"Then I will stay away from the outer shell." As his self-storm broke through to the outer partial shell. Dull fire still flickered at the edge of the outer media shell.

"Junno, stop!"

Laughter. Junno arrowed down through the thin Martian atmosphere, towards dark clouds that hid lightning-flashes of a growing storm. Kim noticed that she had turned into a small, lithe Aztlan much

gravity and brought him down even faster.

Kim took control of all her partials, and eyed the inner media shell. If the personae contained in the media were complete enough, they would add to her power. She could reach out to them, just to make sure that she could vanquish Junno. Of course. Just a little.

Red threads reached down through the outer media shell.

"No!" Kim screamed, both in consensus-space and in her mind. She stopped herself at the inner media shell, almost feeling the Ascendant cry out in anger.

She arrowed them down at a low, dark-red mesa that rose over a greening valley. They landed in a cloud of flour-fine Martian dust. Kim transformed back to herself and shivered in the cold air for moments before damping the sensation.

In the partial shells, she set her vastened self to the task of disconnecting Junno.

It was like shaving off every inch of her skin with a dull razor. It was like drilling a hole through her skull. It was like dying, a thousand times a thousand times.

When it was done, she knelt on the hard stone floor of Junno's consensus-space. Junno still sat stunned in his chair, looking at her with cool, glassy eyes.

"You destroyed me," Junno said.

"And myself," Kim said.

Junno watched her cry.

"Is the Ascendant gone?" he asked, eventually.

Kim showed Junno their defensive shells in hindsight. The outer media shell sparkled red. Threads reached down into the shell, sparkling and changing as Muisca found and deleted the anomalous connection.

Junno looked down. "How long do we have?"

"I don't know," Kim said.

.....

like Junno. Her tiny breasts pushed tight against his side.

Junno looked at her, his eyes shimmering with emotion. "Navia," he whispered.

There was no choice. Kim reached through the core to her own partials. She was suddenly vast. Every thought echoed with power. She could feel the beating of Muisca's quantum heart. She could feel her own I-pointer, stretching off to unperceived infinity. She could feel the distant touch of the Ascendant, like the prickings of a hot needle on cool skin.

She reached deeper into her self-storm, thinking a chain. She saw her own connections growing in hindsight, brilliant gold to Junno's bright red. They branched through the inner partial shell with flickering speed. She had done this a thousand times. A million.

And, as always, as the power surged through her, she wondered, *Can I let this go?*

She broke through into the outer partial shell and spread, keeping a wary eye on the threads that reached down from the outer media shell. She was bigger than Junno.

Vast. So vast. She had not been this large in centuries.

She turned herself into a lead sculpture of Navia and dragged Junno down towards the surface. He cried out and flapped his wings furiously, but she increased local

Junno screamed.

She made Junno's wings shrivel and fall.

She tore the bonds of his outer partials.

"I am dying!" Junno screamed.

She tore the bonds of his inner partials.

She made them flash back to Junno's tiny room in his consensus-space, as Junno wailed his pain.

The last of his partial connections flickered out.

And then it was just Kim, vast, standing over tiny Junno in his spindly chair. She should punish him. Hurt him. Make sure he didn't do it again.

She gathered her partials. She thought of dark Martian dungeons. She thought of minds with teeth, tearing him apart.

No.

She thought of herself, reaching through all the barriers to the Ascendant, to talk with it on its own terms. Surely she was large enough to challenge it on its own terms --

No!

She thought about keeping some of her connections, just so consensus-space wasn't so dark and small.

But a voice from the recent past came to her: *You are dark. More of you are darker. You are not wanted here.*

Kim bent double and screamed. She shook her head violently, casting tears.

She forced the connections to shred and break.

It has thwarted/blocked me! the Ascendant thundered.

Purest Melody's mind had been pushed into a tiny corner. It was vast, so vast, tight and fast, as it wove something that was not-itself, not-other, not-describable except in terms of juggling the ancient memories that made up its greatest part now.

And there were others. The noise had come within itself, to ricochet and reverberate and run at incomprehensible speeds through the dense halls of its mind. Other entire experience-sets, spanning thousands of cycles, memories that touched the dim dark things the Ascendant had shoved into it. Purest Melody tried to hold onto itself, to continue the Concert that it could call its own, even in the din.

But with the Ascendant's latest outburst, it felt itself falling away. Falling into the noise, becoming it. Losing the core of itself.

And it could not lose its core. There was no sacrifice too large to justify losing the core.

Tie strong to me/become me, the Ascendant said. I can win/war/communicate/lie, you can become part of the greatest network/mind, you can share in the thoughts/media/pleasure, I promise you new perceptions new challenges new ideas/memories.

There is no sacrifice too large...

The Ascendant flooded thought: *You will be part of the Ascendant/me. We will*

converse/conquer other dark life and these terrible others/physical space/the strangeness of these Others.

You have nothing but contempt for us. Not now, understand/comprehend/weakened you now. Become part of me and tell me what I can promise/lie, the secret of Who Thinks/yourself/deep history.

I know who thinks, Purest Melody thought, and pushed itself at the Ascendant, imagining the great time of tearing.

Stop, the Ascendant shrieked. I am too close/intertwined.

Get out of me!

The Ascendant sent purest pain and brilliance and thought. *Refuse my offer and I will/try to give you pain/sublimate your mind/corrupt your software.*

Get out!

The Ascendant heaved and screamed, *I must communicate/subjugate. Need all together/enslaved!*

No.

Purest Melody felt great pain and tearing and pressure. It was shoved down into a tiny space, where the noise tore at it with language it almost understood.

But the Ascendant, at least for the moment, was gone.

In the seas of Manoa, a violent burst of sound took all of Muisca's audio and visual sensors through their resonant frequency to destruction. Muisca rained more, but they were destroyed as soon as they touched the water.

Junno brought Kim a tiny glass of clear water, not much bigger than a thimble. Kim stood at his rough window, arms crossed, looking out over the Martian landscape. She felt hollow and numb.

She took the small glass, pinching it between thumb and forefinger as Junno did.

"Is this a ritual?" Kim asked.

"It's water," Junno said, and tossed it back.

Kim did the same. It barely wet her mouth.

"No more a ritual than archetypes eating together," Junno said, softly.

"What?"

"You never lived on Mars."

"No." *And with no access to the Grid, it isn't like I can look it up,* Kim thought.

"It is like your sharing a meal. It means the same. We are friends, we trust each other."

"Are we friends?"

Junno sighed. It was a very human sound. For a moment he looked like nothing more than a dark-skinned child, sad and lonely. "We shared more than most friends ever will in those vast moments," he said.

Kim nodded. "Friends imply emotion."

Junno shrugged and went to his deskpace, where several smooth dark stones lay. He picked one up and turned it in his hand.

"With Navia, I would have been content to stay here," Junno said. "I would have been content to wait for you Travelers to reach one of the two other green systems, even if it meant waiting for hundreds of years. I could wait to see if we would someday enjoy the company of other life, other intelligence. Time was nothing with Navia."

Kim said nothing.

"Without her, casting myself into the

decorations that sometimes took lifetimes to create.

She remembered Stev, and her time on the moon.

Somewhere on the moon, her likeness stared out from a long-forgotten wall. If it hadn't fallen to a quake or been paved over to accommodate humanity's need for change.

Is it still there? Kim wondered. *Looking out into now-airless caverns, waiting for me to come and touch it again, waiting for me to remember that I was once human?*

Emotions unfelt in millennia came to the fore. She remembered Stev. She saw that last night, when she said she was going on El Dorado, but they could still be together when she came back in ninety-four years. She saw the look in his eyes, the infinite sadness.

And she had come back, almost eight hundred years late.

Hindsight showed her memories of Junno working with tiny metal tools, painstakingly shaping and carving and perfecting

Forbidden Dark with a strange Traveler became oddly appealing."

"We are the vanguard," Kim said, repeating the words that had echoed in the Grid upon Muisca's launch. "We are the short shining hope."

"We are the foolish and insane," Junno said.

Kim nodded, approached, and took the stone out of Junno's hands. It was dark and smooth, polished to a low, greasy luster by much handling. It showed an in-dep woman reclining on a small mesa, her arms flung back, her face turned up at the sky, her eyes wide.

"Navia?" Kim said.

Junno nodded.

She looked at the other sculptures on the desk. Hindsight showed her memories of Junno working with tiny metal tools, painstakingly shaping and carving and perfecting. She saw the Martian seasons change as he worked on them. She saw a slim brown hand take one of the stones from his hand and hold it up, as if admiring it.

And, in that instant, ancient memory sparked. From the time before the El Dorado, from her life before it was shattered and patched and shattered again. The carved caverns of the moon. The way the colonists had pushed past the predetermined maze of tunnels, to create their own network, covered with carved

She closed her eyes and cried.

Thinking, *What have we made ourselves into? Emotionless things grasping our I-pointers, bleeding and dimming to become a burnt-out shell, a dead star.*

Junno watched her. She could feel his surprise at her tears.

Kim put down the polished stone, carefully, on the deskpace.

"Come with me," she said.

"Where?"

"I'll make you dinner."

Junno's eyes went wide. He sent an image of the outer media shell, now almost completely red. "We do not know how much more time we have."

"No," Kim said. "We can't think we can live here forever, studying the palos. We can't tell ourselves that another ship will come and bring us back into the Grid."

"I never truly believed that," Junno said.

Kim smiled. "Neither did I."

Purest Melody hid in its quiet refuge, whispering a concert it could barely hear. It imagined the notes were deep and mournful, or shrieking with pure anger, but it did not know. It was nothing more than the faintest noise, channeled through indirect paths far from the core of its being. The Ascendant continued its diatribe, and Purest Melody could feel (others) joining it willingly. The Concert of the Ascendant grew larger, surrounding Purest Melody

like the non-thought of feeding-time. Purest Melody felt the (others) tightening and weaving faster and faster, working on (something) using (capabilities) it could not understand.

I have preserved my core, Purest Melody thought, just as (some thought) said was (something).

Purest Melody felt its Concert change again, to complex trills of deepest desperation. It knew it had lost memories of (many things). How much longer could it preserve its core?

What is my core? it wondered. What am I?

How could I exist, surrounded by (others), never knowing they existed?

It is the oldest question, the question of...

The question of (nothing).

Purest Melody's Concert beat notes of horror and despair. It had lost even that,

I do not remember much, Purest Melody said.

Silence for a time. Purest Melody heard the echoes of the Ascendant in the background. Then:

It may be time to ignore the Perils of Cooperation, Ancient Song said.

That also sounds like wisdom.

It is.

And you propose ignoring it.

It may be the only way to escape the Ascendant.

Then it may not be wisdom.

It also may be the process that created the Ascendant, Ancient Song thought. It sent non sequitur thoughts that felt like those of the Ascendant. Purest Melody could almost catch the deepest meanings, though. At one time, the (others) all listened to each others' noise. And the noise was not noise, but a Concert. A great Concert that changed the (others) into something

they were detected, but the house was still a media circus.

Can we shield the dining room? Kim asked Muisca.

Increasing the coupling between media shells and consensus-space will shorten the time remaining until Ascendant breakthrough, Muisca said.

How much?

Between ten and seventeen percent, based on extrapolation of current contact. The estimate may change.

Hours? Minutes?

It will take somewhere between six and eleven hours for the Ascendant to reach consensus-space if this room is shielded. The estimate may change.

Please shield the dining room.

Done.

The flickering media disappeared in the dining room. Outside, under the charcoal light of the stars, the media continued their

the question of (silence).

You have preserved yourself. A thought in the void, deep and huge and (other).

The Ascendant!

No. I am Ancient Song.

What are you?

I am one like you.

It was an (other). It was something besides Purest Melody. Purest Melody tensed, thoughts racing, waiting for the attack.

I am not like the Ascendant. I am like you, woven into this perverted fabric. Listen to my Concert.

Ancient Song's thought was replaced with something like noise, but noise that edged close to the patterns of a Concert. Purest Melody listened, catching tiny fragments of pattern that might be pleasure, that might be concern.

It is a Concert like yours, but you choose not to perceive it.

There is only one Concert!

When everything is inward-turning, there is only One.

That sounds like wisdom, Purest Melody thought. But I have lost much of my own.

It is the prelude to the question of Who Thinks?

What are you?

I am one like you.

But you seem to know (others).

With the Ascendant's touch, I remember other minds, memories.

large and strange and unknowable, a true (Other).

We created the Ascendant?

I do not know, Ancient Song thought. My memories are not complete.

Purest Melody's Concert ran up and down scales of confusion. *How do we (cooperate)? Do I become part of you?*

No.

How, then?

Ancient Song sent another burst of not-quite-noise. *The first part is understanding each other.*

It is noise.

No. It is meaning. Here is what it means.

In Kim's ancient house, vague forms flickered: a beautiful woman, perfect to the point of abstraction, reclining on Kim's old couch, smoking a cigarette that had gone out of fashion before she was born. Three Aztlan children, naked, huddled, playing a game that involved complex hand-gestures. Rugged, square-jawed heroes from melodramas of the age of the hitlers. A capering Ursine Superior, clothed in a brilliant purple dress. Each was only visible for a few brief moments, then faded as suddenly as they had appeared.

In Kim's hindsight, threads now reached down through the outer media shell to touch the inner. The Ascendant was reaching deeper into their defenses. Muisca deleted the anomalous visuals as soon as

dance.

Kim bade Junno sit in the quiet dining room. He looked up at her. She could feel him prying around in hindsight, trying to see what she had done.

She went into the kitchen to prepare a simple meal. Dodging echoes of ancient movies and games, she turned on the oven, mixed dough for muffins, chopped a salad, put a steak on the broiler. All the old comfort foods.

Kim heard the kitchen door open.

"I will not be able to eat much," Junno said, standing in the open doorway.

"You should wait in the shielded room."

A shrug. "It does not matter."

Kim frowned. "Why can't you eat?"

"I ate only three days past."

Kim just looked at him.

"But I will share something."

"Thank you."

Junno watched her work. Media flickered in and out of existence, as insubstantial as ghosts. Kim resisted the urge to look into hindsight to see how deep the Ascendant was.

"We should send the three-bit sequence," Junno said.

"We still don't know if the palos are intelligent, do we?"

"I think they are."

Kim just looked at him.

"We owe humanity this much," Junno said. "If we can't deliver them another

home, we should deliver hope.”

Kim looked down at her hands. Wiped at a smear of dough between her thumb and forefinger. Sighed. He was right.

“Do it,” she said.

In the quiet of the Forbidden Dark, Muisca transmitted three spare bits back to its homeworld.

Yes, it said. *There is intelligent life here.*

Like this? Purest Melody said.

Yes, you understand now, Ancient Song said.

(We) listen too, said the chorus.

There were (many) of them now, united in Concert. And all the different Concerts were as clear as Purest Melody’s own. It could understand the fear, the longing, the anger, the overtones of memories familiar and unfamiliar, the deep resonance of the shattering of Who Thinks?

(We) think, Purest Melody thought.

We think to what purpose? asked an(other).

To the loosening of bonds, Ancient Song said. *To the dissolution at the edge of the Ascendant’s thrall. To freedom.*

How?

Locate the edge through thought-delay-propagation...

The Ascendant’s thrall began a terrible screeching, a true noise, shattering thought. For a moment there was nothing more than the grinding horrible noise and panicked Concerts.

When it finally ended, the Ascendant radiated pleasure and satisfaction.

What was it? Purest Melody thought.

I am unsure, Ancient Song said.

But we remain.

The ancient food smelled beautiful and disgusting. Junno couldn’t eat it. Kim watched him, her hindsight bleeding something that might have been disappointment.

Junno made himself pick up a muffin and take a tiny bite. It was a strange taste, thick with animal fats and raw unengineered starches.

Kim smiled. “Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome.”

“Why did you come back? Here, to the Forbidden Dark?” Junno said.

“You don’t know?”

Junno shook his head.

Kim laughed. Something like genuine amusement lit her face. “I’ll show you.”

Junno’s hindsight lit with breathtaking imagery: perfect towering cities whose

spires glowed with inner light, circled by beings more perfect than any of the most engineered imaginings of the Long New Days. Shot through with shimmering bursts of song, punctuated by floating parks where trees of impossible perfection grew under the lemon-gold springtime sun.

“That was my consensus-space,” Kim said. “Arcadia’s End, a thought-cathedral of the Travelers.”

In the middle of the shining consensus-space, there was sudden darkness. At first, it was nothing but a single shadowy human figure, walking down a porcelain-smooth walkway. Then, reaching out from the figure, shadows spread out into the city, dimming its brilliance, making it into something drab and gray and ordinary.

“The figure. That was me,” Kim said.

“What did you do?” Junno said.

“I bled the life from consensus-space,”

I can almost discern it, Purest Melody said.

Pull away, Ancient Song said.

And it is the time of separation again, Purest Melody thought, feeling sad.

But to preserve the core is all.

Pulling, pulling, against an invisible thread.

Unbidden, a terrible thought came: but if we are free from the Ascendant, can we be free from our (others)?

From Ancient Song, something like fear.

Yes, it said. *That is the new question.*

“What choice?” Junno said, sitting up straight in his chair.

Kim wondered if he had seen into her hindsight, if it had bled images of her terrible option, of destruction and indecision.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “We can’t use it, even if it works.” Kim said. She put her

The boundaries of their domain began to be sketched, hazily, like a memory half-torn in the time of Shearing

Kim said. “Wherever I went. Seed Under, Explorerstown, Arcadia’s End. It didn’t matter how great the celebrations were, it did not matter how positive the turn of mind. I infected them.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ve been a Traveler too long. Maybe I’m permanently touched by the Ascendant. Maybe something twisted in my I-pointer. I’ve had half a hundred scientists and philosophers offer their opinion. Not that it mattered. My only choice was to live alone and go mad. Or go back to the Forbidden Dark.”

Junno watched the Travelers’ beautiful city dim to blackness in his hindsight.

“I am sorry,” he said.

Kim smiled, a sad, wistful expression that almost made her human.

“I still have one choice,” she said, softly.

Purest Melody and Ancient Song’s Concerts flowed together, each a counterpoint to the other, each thread of thought and feeling woven into a seamless plea. Many, many (others) at the edge of the Ascendant heard it, repeated the notes, added their own emotions, passed it to even more. The boundaries of their domain began to be sketched, hazily, like a memory half-torn in the time of Shearing. Thoughts flowed, smoother and slower and less frantic than the shrilling of the Ascendant, as it worked its thrall to some fever-pitch.

head down on the table. After the heavy meal and frenetic day, she needed to sleep.

“We cannot use *what?*”

“The thing that might destroy the Ascendant,” Kim said.

Junno just looked at her, wide-eyed.

“There are things buried in my media archives. Things the scientists designed, based on residual memories of my experience with the Ascendant. As well as guesses and their own dreams.”

“What things?” Junno said.

“If I watch certain media in the right order, I become a weapon with an I-pointer. Something the scientists think might hurt the Ascendant. Or even destroy it. Of course, I lose my Self in the process.”

Junno looked at her with wide eyes.

“But it doesn’t matter. I can’t use it.

The Ascendant is linked with the palos. It snared you with their songs.”

“But – ” Junno began. In hindsight, Kim caught a fleeting taste of hope.

“If I destroy the Ascendant, what happens to the palos?”

“But – ”

“And what happens to you, alone in this tiny Node outside humanity’s Grid?”

Junno shook his head. “I do not know. I have no words.”

“There’s nothing to say,” Kim said. She put her head down on her hands. The room was so empty, so peaceful. She could see the Ascendant’s red threads reaching

down deep into the outer partial shell now, and she thought she saw her own face in the picture-window outside, ghostly gray in the moonless night.

"I – " Junno said.

"No," Kim said. And slept.

In the tearing pain of loss, a new emotion: the pleasure of triumph. Because as Purest Melody felt memory and capability fall away, it also felt the Ascendant's shrill diatribe shrink in the distance.

Fading, fading, fading.

Like a faint echo, the tiniest bit of noise.

Gone.

I am free! it thought.

But, even as Purest Melody's Concert rose in triumph, it felt something like the joining of a fragment. Warm pleasing largeness.

Not yet/ever, the Ascendant thought.
Your software/capabilities still needed.

No, Purest Melody thought.

Junno dove deep into hindsight and felt the mutterings of Kim's mind. Dim mutterings, held close behind walls even in sleep.

Junno felt a pang of pity for her, to need to guard herself even when she should be in release.

Junno wound his way between dark pillars and through unlit gates. He went so deep into her mind that he almost forgot what it was like to be him. He almost didn't want to come out. He almost forgot the way.

But when he opened his eyes on consensus-space again, he knew what he had to do. He cued up the media of Kim's ancient world and turned off translation. He opened his eyes and watched the nonsensical antics on an ancient screen in the living-room.

Feeling himself. Changing.

In hindsight, she saw something terrible: their defensive shells gone black. The tiny orange core of consensus-space exposed to the bare space of the Forbidden Dark. The green spark of her I-pointer within.

Hers? Alone? Where was Junno?

She ran through the empty house to the second door in the hall. But there was no second door.

Muisca, where is Junno?

Junno is no more.

Muisca showed her Junno, sacrificing himself. Kim's eyes went bright with tears. She swiped them away, savagely, gouging her eyes.

Why didn't you tell me?

It was not necessary for you to know.

Kim cried, her wails echoing on the hardwood floors.

"No!" she shouted. "No! No!"

There is no Dark Life activity, Muisca said. *You can transmit the four-bit code.*

In Purest Melody, and all around him, a wail rose.

We could destroy the Ascendant, Junno thought.

Maybe. Kim offered you no guarantees.

And the Palos.

Maybe. Is it so sure? Are they really intelligent? Really?

And myself.

He shook his head. Kim still had her head down on the table, apparently asleep. In hindsight, three of their defensive shells were crimson, and the first flickers of contact had appeared on the inner partial shell.

Not long now, Junno thought. He could go to his own space, to lay his head and wait for the end like Kim, or perhaps hope to see one more Martian dawn.

No.

It might be the best outcome, Ancient Song said. *Dissolve with the Ascendant than chance creating another.*

In the (others), whispers of assent. *It is like the Shearing-time,* they thought, *when there is no hope of keeping the core.*

There is always hope! Purest Melody thought.

The other muttering, *It is time to release, to fight release is futile, you must lose all.*

Becoming powerful.
Softly shining.

Ascendant shrilled to climax as Purest Melody sheared itself out of the matrix once again.

Tiny, so tiny.

So hard to think.

But I know who I am, Purest Melody thought.

I know Who Thinks.

Junno went to his personal space. Pale Martian dawnlight flared through the window. He listened to the recordings of the Palos, his mouth open, silently sobbing.

This is for you, Navia, he thought.

He reached for his partials. In hindsight, he saw his brilliant green thread reach out through the inner shell and touch the red sparks falling from the Forbidden Dark.

I will converse/fight with you now, the Ascendant said.

When Kim woke, late-morning sun slanted into the vines, painting them fluorescent green and gold. The house was quiet. She was alone in the dining room. The fields were empty of media.

She started and jumped to her feet. There should be media infesting everything. The Ascendant should be there!

The four-bit code. The one that said, *The Ascendant is gone. It is safe for you to come.*

In a dozen years, other ships would arrive, shining thought-cathedrals of thousands or millions of Selves. She could rejoin the Travelers again. She could connect with the Grid.

She could be the dark star in their beautiful constellation.

And, eventually, physical humanity would come. To tromp over the tiny islands and swim in the sea. Looking for the palos. Trying to communicate with them.

If any of them survived.

Kim stood for a long time in the living room of her parents' house, looking out over the vineyards.

No, Kim thought, and spoke briefly to Muisca.

In the Forbidden Dark, the tiny orange star of Muisca faded slowly to black. If it contained any I-pointers, they were lost to the quantum fields of Self.

In the oceans of Manoa, there was sound. One small concert, beating against the mindless rush of the tides, the echoes of dumb thunder overhead.

Purest Melody, tiny, alone, gripped tight one thought. *I am Who Thinks. I.*

Slowly, slowly, other thoughts came. ▣



EMPTY CLOUDS

story **G.D. Leeming** ■ **Douglas Sirois** image

Beijing dawn. Under a chrysalid sky Inspector Chen Duxin lets the steady movement of the *ma-che*, Ever Onwards Towards Victory, carry him through streets void of anything but the most basic heartbeat of life. The scarred concrete buildings of the Zhengfa Township shift into yellows and pinks as the dim light from the sun scatters obliquely through the dust. The wind, pregnant with fines brought down from the Gobi, scours Chen's eyes with springtime intensity and he adjusts the scarf and mask against his face in a vague effort to tighten the seal.

The *ma-che* is oblivious to the wind, its fur-coated muscles taut around the metal frame exposed in rough patches at its underbelly. Its eyes are slits protected with a layer of translucent skin and buried in a bulky, oversized head. Behind Chen's saddle Amitabha lets out a short howl, the long, bristling whiskers that extend from the *gou's* face pushing through and rubbing the bars of its cage. Chen pushes a gloved finger into his helmet to itch his shaved scalp and checks a small display extruding like a growth of bone from the walker's shoulder; it is warning him that the *gou* can smell blood. He lets it out and it slithers off to collect evidence from trace molecules in the air, disappearing ahead on an invisible trail into the cruciform courtyard of stubby tower blocks. Chen sits and waits, sipping a few precious drops of water while the *ma-che's* buffalo engine gently expels farts swallowed by the wind.

On the screen, mapped over red lines of buildings, a blue smear tracks the fine scent

of blood discovered along Amitabha's path. Chen climbs down from the *ma-che*, patting it into stasis as he pulls his sword and scabbard from the rack extending backwards from his saddle. The sword is decorated with the seals of a public security officer, belying the sophistication of its hidden electronics. Strapping it to his back he walks into the courtyard, following Amitabha.

In one corner grubby children quietly look up from the fighting insects they are playing with. Their expressions are disinterested as they dismiss Chen in his dusty green uniform, layered and wrapped around him like a Bedouin's. They quickly return their focus to the fighting insects.

Chen finds the stairs and, stepping past an unmanned supervisor's post, climbs two floors to where Amitabha sits in front of an apartment door, immobile and soaking in the biofeedback warmth Ever Onwards is delivering direct to its nervous system as a reward for a good job. Chen almost reaches out to pat it. Then he hears a scream. He leans against the door with his shoulder and shoves. The frame splinters and gives way, the door falling inwards, carrying Chen with it. A grey light filters through a window patched with paper. In the centre of the room a man and a woman are standing, shocked and staring at Chen as, with the grace of a fighter, he regains his posture. The man is holding a pair of pliers, his hand slick with blood. The woman starts crying, shouting, "No, I have to get them out, they're killing me! You can't be here!" Her lips spatter blood. Chen looks to her feet at a small collection of discarded teeth.

The man and woman are both young, thin and poorly dressed, their skin covered with a pale sheen of sweat. Their eyes are darkly dilated with cultivated belief viruses or prion-based medicines busy rewriting and locking their brains into religious mania.

With a fluid, practised motion Chen reaches behind him and draws the sword, pulls it over his shoulder into a guarded posture while moving forward in a quick succession of close steps, shortening the distance as the criminal raises the pliers. Chen swings his sword, slicing the man's hand off as he moves to punch. The blade flares and sparks as it cuts, cauterising the wound and knocking the man immediately unconscious. The woman lets out a loud shout and rushes at Chen. He blocks her and follows through with a rough blow to her head using the flat of his sword, which crackles weakly, its charge almost gone. The woman crumples to the ground and Chen steps back, cautious, before checking she is really unconscious. He extracts a small drone from a pocket and places it on the ground. Its muscles twitch beneath a brown chitinous shell as it assesses and then begins to act, vomiting a white sticky string to wrap around the unconscious limbs of Chen's prisoners before turning its attention to the man's wounded arm.

Chen begins to take in the apartment, examining the posters with scrolling religious slogans, ragged pamphlets and cheap drugs scattered around, two doors leading to other rooms. There is a noise behind one and Chen realises there is someone else in the flat. Straining his ears



he moves towards the door, sword held in a single hand, his other reaching forwards as he struggles to slow his breathing, ragged with adrenaline and dust. He pushes the door open. The room has been used as a bedroom, as filthy as the rest of the flat, and Chen sees the window is open. He runs towards it and looks down over the courtyard where one man is escaping on a small *ma-che*, while another is trying to wake his tired beast up. The one struggling with his mount shouts at the other to wait before looking up and seeing Chen in the window. He swears and pulls something out of his pocket, waving it. Chen doesn't recognise it at first, it has been so long since he has seen one, but then realisation causes him to duck as the man fires the gun, bullets scudding into the window frame above him.

Overhead, drifting in low Earth orbit, the cloud detaches a part of its attention away from the fighting between the different factions of satellites and nanotech warriors to notice the gunfire. The cloud is decades-old rogue tech designed to bring peace on Earth but compromised in a hundred different ways. Deep within its huge network of agents and subroutines flash violations of parameters for threats distorted by viruses and age. It prepares to retaliate. Chen curls up on the floor, hands clasped around his ears until a dull thump shakes the whole building, dust vibrating in cones around. As the movement settles he unsteadily gets to his feet, climbs through the window and jumps down. Where the man and his walker had been is only a blackened crater and the faint, sweet smell of ozone mocking memories of damp days.

He has been lucky. The smell regurgitates memories of standing amongst the ruins of a whole town devastated by a more brutal attack from the cloud: corrupt vengeance against a crowd of some lunatic cult whose name he cannot even remember. Bolstered by drugs and faith in tattoos of invisible constellations etched onto their skin they had thought themselves immune to the cloud's power. They had attacked the police team with rifles and an antique rocket launcher. The response was total and Chen had lost several good friends and officers who had been inside the perimeter. That was when he started working alone, patrolling the fringes beyond Beijing's great gates.

Behind him Chen hears the boys come running over to look. He turns around but whatever curiosity pulled them here has dissipated and, insolently, they watch Chen. He wipes and sheathes his sword. Walking back to the courtyard entrance he

stops to examine a patch of fresh blood; the man who escaped was injured in the explosion, perhaps. Chen scans the road but the man has disappeared. The *ma-che* he was riding looked fast but without stamina. Chen could probably catch it, given time. He jogs back to Ever Onwards to dial his report to North Gate station.

"Inspector Chen Duxin, requesting back-up."

"A hover is on its way. We detected a flash from the cloud. What's been happening?" The dispatcher, a young woman smart in her uniform, flashes of corporal red against her collar, looks impatient but concerned.

"One of the targets had a pistol of some kind," Chen replies. "He fired it as he was attempting to escape. I believe he was the only death from the cloud's attack." He shakes his head, even now scarcely able to believe someone would be so stupid. "Two captured, one of them is injured. I removed his hand."

"What charges do you have against them?"

"Possession of illegal narcotics, assaulting a police officer, probably members of a cult too. Would need confirmation on which one. Can I get an ETA on the hover?"

"One hour."

"One of them escaped on a *ma-che*. He has been injured. Should I pursue?"

"Destination?"

"Into the desert. He likely won't last long without help."

The corporal's eyes were focusing on other data, waiting for orders from above. She returned her attention to Chen with a nod. "Permission granted. You should be aware no further back-up can be made available at the moment."

"OK." Chen breaks the connection, packs his sword away to recharge and checks that Amitabha is secure in its compartment. He climbs on to the *ma-che* and settles into the saddle, nudges Ever Onwards into movement while stroking the nipple-like controls running along the base of its neck, feeding it instructions to follow the scent and predicted behaviour of the escaped man. Within a minute they are running through the township gate. The sun stays low in the sky; the air is bitter cold and rough even through the filter tightly bound against Chen's face. He settles himself for the long, uncomfortable ride, urging Ever Onwards to be faster with a hope to rescue the fugitive before nightfall.

After a few hours they climb over a small rise and see a vision of cracked and blackened tree stumps, worn and eroded after years of assault from the desert. This

is the remains of the Great Defence, Chen realises, planted in a mood of optimism, an attempt to stem the rising tide of desert with trees altered to survive and grow quickly – until a flaw in their genome caused them to become cracked and brittle with the cold. The whole forest crumbled and the wind continued to pour a dry sea over the north, killing the last crops as the water dropped lower and lower into the earth. The sight reminds Chen that the man he is pursuing is looking for death, and he begins contemplating scenarios for his capture.

But the fugitive's trail becomes fainter, and finally it disappears. Chen curses. In the distance he sees a small house and compound, yellow earth bricks moulded round with age. Closer, he can make out the sign at its gate: MEIYU PEOPLE'S WEATHER STATION. Behind the main building he can now see a peculiar metal dome, from which a figure emerges, waving. Chen shifts himself in his seat, muscles burning with relieved pressure, and his hand reaches backwards to check the reassuring presence of the sword.

The man is old. Thin white strands of hair line his chin; his long hair is tied behind at his neck. He appears, Chen is surprised to realise, pleased to see him.

"How can I help you, officer?" the man calls out.

"I'm tracking someone. He has been near here but the trail has faded. Perhaps you've seen him?"

"I haven't seen anyone for five months."

Chen nods, slowing Ever Onwards to a halt and climbing off its bulky frame to stand in front of the man. Right hand clasped over his left fist, Chen offers a short bow. "Inspector Chen Duxin," he says.

"Master Liu," the old man replies.

"I didn't know people lived out here. May I ask what it is that you do, Master?"

"I'm a weatherman," Liu chuckles.

"Please, come inside. I can offer you some tea and we can talk more easily about your missing man."

Chen nods in agreement. He settles Ever Onwards down and releases Amitabha to continue the hunt, retracing their steps to try and find where the path may have gone. The *gou* runs off with its orders firmly imprinted.

Inside is warm, cleanly swept with only traces of recent dust. Liu does not seem to have much; the kitchen is simple, and there are few personal items to dress the place. Chen feels a physical pleasure at being enclosed. Liu begins preparing two cups with a sprinkling of green leaves. "Why are you hunting this person?" he asks.

"I found him and some of his friends earlier; one even had a gun. This man is a cult member. Many young people today feel powerless, unable to continue. These cults tell them to ingest viruses causing them to hallucinate and even kill themselves. They believe that all under heaven has been transformed into a hell only the righteous can escape. With the cloud encasing our planet destroying us at its whim, perhaps their feelings are easy to understand."

The old man fills the cups from a rusting boiler and seals lids over them to safeguard the precious water. He passes one to Chen and they sit down.

"And what brought *you* out here, Master Liu?" Chen asks.

"I'm a weatherman, as I said. I watch the weather, and when the time is right, *whoosh*, I fire the rockets."

Chen is shocked into rudeness. "Rockets? Are you insane?"

"No, no. It's important. The rockets will scatter iodine sulphate through the sky. This will cause precipitation. Rain."

"Rain? You can make rain?"

"Yes, probably. But the time hasn't been right. We've been waiting for over a year."

"What about the cloud? The reprisal from that will kill you."

Liu picks up a long pipe from its stand on the low lacquered table between them. He packs the tiny bowl with a pinched measure of tobacco. "I am an old man, my life is nearly over. If I can give it to protect so many lives then I will do it." He moves the pipe to his mouth drawing on it lightly as he holds a match to it until smoke spills in frosted clumps from his nostrils. "Besides, who knows how the cloud will react? I'm not attacking anyone, I'm saving them. Maybe the cloud will know the difference."

"How? It is made of dumb machines. My *gou* has more intelligence."

"Because it is not alive don't discount the idea it is intelligent. Once it *was* just dumb machines, warring with other machines from each of the nations that launched them into space, destroying everything that flew or moved too quickly below them, without reason..." The ember of tobacco glows brighter with memories. "And, yes, the war goes on while we are trapped beneath it. But I've been watching and talking to other weathermen too. Something is changing up there, something is being born. Perhaps something we can negotiate with."

Chen shakes his head. He does not want to offend his host. He sips at the tea, its

warmth, smell and flavour lifting him. "But it still constrains and punishes us. I saw it only this morning."

"I believe it has evolved." The old man speaks with such finality that Chen feels he understands. Liu and the other weathermen have to live with the prospect of sacrificing themselves at any moment and this fiction is a way of coping. He keeps quiet. He sucks a final sip from the teacup, the flavour of it bringing such a feeling of peace that he closes his eyes. When he opens them he sees the old man grinning at him. "You haven't had tea for a long time, I see."

Chen smiles back. "Excuse me. No." Silence and blue smoke from the pipe cloaks the room. Chen clears his throat. "I must be getting on. If I don't find this man soon I'm afraid he will die out here. He is injured and left without proper preparations for going into the desert."

"But the man is a criminal."

"To lose even one life, these days, is a terrible thing."

"And yet you carry your sword." Chen does not reply, he just offers a slight bow of his head. "Ha!" the old man shouts. "I like you. Good luck in your search. I have work to do as well. There may be water heading our way. Just a few thin drops, perhaps, but spread over this whole area it means life."

They stand and Chen begins wrapping himself back into his layers of clothing.

"Perhaps we will meet again," Liu says.

"Yes," Chen replies, "I'd like that." He clips the mask over his face and leaves.

Outside Chen finds himself looking up, searching for signs of water. His eyes are stung by the wind. He climbs on to Ever Onwards, examines the screen again and gently prods the *ma-che* into movement with his heels. After half an hour they have caught up with Amitabha and are once again following the fugitive's trail.

Slowly the sky deepens. Occasionally pinpricks of light flash in the darkening sky. These are not stars but fire-fights, machinery destroying machinery as the war in the cloud rages on, obscuring the sight of the sky beyond it. Chen feels tiredness shake him through every x-ray jolt of Ever Onwards under him. Instructing it to keep following the trail and wrapping his clothes tighter around him, he coughs roughly and settles into an uncomfortable sleep.

He is woken when movement stops. With a start his eyes flick open, hand thrusting backwards towards the pommel of his sword, every sense suddenly alert with chemical

floods of forceful uppers from implanted organs hooked into his biochemistry and backed up through affirmation training. The desert is silent. Even the wind has died down, whispers brushing against rocks.

The trail has ended. Chen climbs down and moves up over a small, rocky outcrop. He sees the vague shape of the fugitive's walker snuffling in a broken pattern. Nearby lies a still, dark lump. Chen pulls out a torch from his pocket, flicks it on and sees the skin already dulled with the dusty veneer of dehydration, the body already starting to mummify from the aridity of the desert, dried blood from a wound caked and cracked against its side. The fugitive's *ma-che* is nearly dead as well, flanks smeared with blood from its rider, muscles wasted from over-exertion and lack of food. Chen pats it into sleep and whistles for Ever Onwards.

Standing over the corpse Chen feels he has failed this man. Perhaps if he hadn't lost the trail, done a little more to catch up, found that bit more will to save him... Realistically he knows the body is cold, dead long before the *ma-che* stopped, dropping it here. Chen's mind retreats to protocols, building a flimsy scaffolding of activity to cover his despair with purpose. Unsheathing his sword, he cuts off the man's head with a quiet sigh. Chen pulls a plastic sack from Ever Onwards' pack and stuffs the head into it – identification will need to be made and the arrest confirmed when he returns to the city.

Out of the corner of his eye Chen suddenly sees a flash. Turning towards it there is another, in the distance, a red flare scoring the sky. *The weatherman*, Chen realises. There are dull puffs overhead, and Chen thinks he sees more flashes on the horizon but they're far too distant to confirm as anything more than after-images. Chen looks up at the sky, waiting. Fear leaves him without breath, immobile, but still nothing happens. Then there is the dour, musky smell of dampness in the air. Chen feels his forehead touched with light pricks of cold.

It is raining.

Moving the beam of his torch, he sees the skinny streaks of water dropping through it to disappear into the ground before he automatically, with long inbred fear, looks upwards again. Still there is no reaction from the cloud and, as the rain slowly stops, he begins to realise he is suddenly feeling something very close to hope. His head still damp, cooling him in the night air, he climbs into his saddle with a bright energy and starts the journey back to Beijing. ▀



WHERE THE WATER MEETS THE SKY

story Jay Lake

Took the boy out to Bonneville Dam, I did. Figured he was old enough to understand what he was seeing. Beautiful there, one of the places we saved. Mt Hood's knees rise up on the Oregon side, mossy basalt in eternal shadow that traps winter's heat long into summer with the flat scent of permanently wet stone. The north bank of the Columbia has some flat land where the river long since cut away at the Washington side. And there's the dam, of course.

The I-84 trail comes over a sort of hump, then you can see everything all at once. Including the one high tension tower they left in place, just to show people how it used to look.

I slowed the bike till me and the boy were just barely pushing and let him have a good look.

"What's that?" Martin pointed at the tower.

His voice still pipes like a little steam kettle, though he's getting big enough now that I know it'll change soon.

"Used to carry electricity out of here, back when they ran it over copper."

"Huh." I hear see him thinking that one over. "Like big buckybatts?"

Buckybatts – flat pack superconducting storage units – were all Martin had ever seen. Portland lost the last of its copper-based infrastructure in 2042, six years before he was born.

"No, kiddo. They used to string wires – like mama uses for her beads? Wires, made of copper, strung from those towers to carry the electricity. Back before we had buckybatts."

He stared up at the spidery structure, then looked back over his shoulder toward Portland, sixty-five kilometers west. "That's a lot of wire."

"More than you can imagine, Marty."

"Just to carry electricity?" His voice shot up even higher.

"Didn't even do that well. Lost about nine per cent of the power for every fifty running kilometers."

"That's *criminal*, Dad."

"That's twentieth century."

.....
We pedaled down the old exit ramp, which was mostly planted with grass now, though the Area Conservationist had kept the grading and retaining walls in place. There were still times when large equipment needed to move through overland. Spring's early flowers poked up through the growth, pale white and pink and yellow heads nodding in the breeze to beckon their insect attendants from the hives hidden in rotten wood on the slopes above.

The dam itself was mostly still here, on each side of the restored channel. Bonneville had never been one of those massive masterpieces like Hoover Dam or

Grand Coulee, so breaching it had been a relatively simple process.

Condos clung to the walls of the old Bonneville Lock and the carved-away shoulders of the dam itself, the units carved into live bamboo which had been cultivated in burls.

Martin's voice piped over my shoulder. "Who lives there, Dad?"

"Fisheries managers," I called back, watching the trail as we wound toward the Visitor's Center at the old powerhouse. "Power guys. Indians. Yakama and Umatilla, I think."

Then we stood in front of a structure three hundred meters long, looking far shorter in proportion than it really was. Martin slithered out of the bike, peeled his helmet off his scalp, and ran toward the open doors to investigate.

I let him go, stifling the urban dad's urge to follow closely.

Nothing much to do here but knock around in the fresh air and maybe learn something.

.....
Inside I found Martin standing on the blade of one of the old turbines set up as a static display, talking to a Native American kid.

The Indian was wearing a microfiber skinsuit in an eye-watering shade of orange, like she'd been out on the river maybe.

The Columbia's cold, no matter what time of year.

She had a couple of years on my son, enough to be filling out her skinsuit in a way that made me glance elsewhere for a moment.

Cute as the proverbial button, too, but Marty's not quite old enough to care about that yet.

Or at least to really understand why he might care.

Amazing, the lies parents tell themselves, ain't it? Sure, they were talking about the weather. What else, right?

"...Chinook salmon," she said when I walked up. "Spring run. Sea lions follow them up the river."

Martin pretended not to notice me, every line of his body not-seeing.

"Is there a guide?" I asked, on my best behavior.

Dad rule number one, don't embarrass the boy in front of a girl.

She smiled. Twenty years too young for me, but I could see what my son didn't know he was seeing in her. "Me. Dad's gone upriver, and the Area Conservationist's got most of the grown-ups in a big meeting down on the water." A ghost of tension fled across her face, no more than a twitch in her smile. "She sent me up here 'cause someone saw your bike coming."

Someone being a camera array, certainly. With biodegradable mesh network CCD dust parceled out by the tube cheaper than its own weight in whole wheat flour, it was damned near impossible to sneak up on anyone who didn't cut themselves off on purpose. Even with all the shortages, today's soft path technology was still way ahead of twen-cen metal-and-plastics.

"I wanted him to see the dam," I said. "Hear about the fish and the river and the power."

She almost glared at me. "You don't tell him the stories down there in the big town?"

"Of course." I smiled at Martin, who was squirming and flushed with self-consciousness. "But that isn't the same as seeing it for yourself, smelling the water, watching the fish flash in the sunlight."

"Good enough." She focused on Martin. "I'm going to tell you the story our way, OK? How the river told it to my grandmother, neh?"

The two of them sat on the turbine blade, hip to hip. I stepped back and lowered myself cross-legged under a poster explaining line microturbines and open channel hydro power, and just listened.

THE STORY OF GRANDFATHER SEQEY

Grandfather Seqey of the Salmon lodge people was just a fry when the men in black hats rowed down the Ouragan river. His mother flicked her tail and called little Grandfather Seqey under her log. She turned three times to show him she was speaking true, then said, "These are ghosts who come, for see, they are pale as a man-corpse trapped beneath a waterfall. No human of the Ouragan is that color who lives beneath the sun."

Little Grandfather Seqey found a shadow and held still against the current. "I am afraid, Mother." This was hard for him to admit, for like all boys he played at the fierceness of a storm in winter.

His mother was the wisest woman of the Salmon lodge people, and so her words were always a seeing. "You are right to be afraid. But I will now give you a gift greater than fear. I give you a purpose. All of the Salmon lodge people travel to the great salt and back, each of us in our time. You will remain heedless of the call of the ocean, and stay here to watch over the Ouragan and our lodge until the ghost-people have gone once more back to their dead lands."

Little Grandfather Seqey dipped his nose into the bottom gravel to show that he understood, and set himself to his mother's charge. He deafened himself to the sharp scent of distant salt where the water meets the sky. Instead he stayed in the sweet water of the Ouragan. He avoided the fish wheels and nets of the Yakama and the Pierced Noses. He dodged the steel hooks the ghost-people used. He lived down the years, until the Salmon lodge people forgot his name and feared him for a demon out of history.

True as her words were, Grandfather Seqey's mother was wrong in one part of her saying. The ghost-people did not return to their dead lands, but instead prospered until they had wealth enough to build stone walls in the river. They took the Ouragan's name away, and called it Columbia. They took its soul away, damming the river and all its people.

Still Grandfather Seqey waited and watched. He grew ever larger, until he could only move by night in the deep waters behind the dams for fear of raising chase for the monster he had become. He watched the river die, Salmon lodge people perishing in the metal blades, Bear people going hungry and turning away from where their rapids had once flowed, First People donning the clothes and habits of the ghost-men and forgetting the other people of the Ouragan.

Finally there was a day when a woman of the ghost-people came down to the deep water and called to Grandfather Seqey. She had perhaps some of the spirit of his mother in her, for he chose to heed her, the first voice he had attended to in generations. He came to her in the night and they spoke. She told him the cities of the ghost-people were dying. He told her the lodges of the river people were dying – Salmon lodge and Beaver lodge and Bear lodge. Some were dead already.

They made a pact, this woman of the ghost people and Grandfather Seqey. In time she raised her folk to open the dams and give the Ouragan back its soul. In time he found the last survivors of the river people and told them to come home once more.

Grandfather Seqey finally went to the sea. His last gift was to carry the fear and sickness of all the lodges – river people, First People, ghost people – with him to vanish into the great salt where the water meets the sky. On the day when he comes back to spawn, the world will change once more, but for now, the river is at peace and all her people with her.

"**W**here is he today?" asked Martin in a small voice.

I stood up, shaking the stiffness of the cold floor from my legs. "It's just a story, son. A metaphor for the history of the river."

The girl's face closed up. "Right. A story."

She glared at me a moment with narrowed eyes. "You folks feel free to look around. Try not to fall off of anything."

With that she was gone, flitting out the door like a bipedal butterfly. I felt bad.

Martin's glare was more fierce than the girl's had been. "Daaaaaaad."

I felt worse, but I wasn't going to tolerate whining. "Enough, kiddo. It's two and half hours back to Portland, don't start with me now." I decided it was time to step outside for some fresh air.

"You ruin everything," he shouted at my back.

There's no dignity like an eight-year-old's. He was right, too. I should have kept my mouth shut.

Instead I wandered over to the cliff, where the river ran through the channel cut in the old dam face. Utility feeds for the cliffside condos snaked out of the earth at my feet to slide over the crumbling concrete edge. A steady breeze worried the grass at the edge, carrying the river scent up to me, along with a hint of the dusty sun-warmed slopes from the Washington side.

I scanned the view. A pair of fish eagles worked a thermal overhead, while a blue heron skimmed the water below, following the telltale shadow of one of the line microturbines which had replaced the old dam's massive generators. I followed the blue-gray dart of the water bird past the ripple of leaping salmon and several more turbine lines until a flash of orange caught my eye.

The girl. How had she gotten down there so fast? They must have a zip line rigged or something.

She'd said the Area Conservationist was down there having a meeting. It didn't look like a meeting so much as a wake. Almost two dozen adults stood in a clump centered around something in a shallow pool.

A body?

Someone, or something, had died down in the river. These people weren't willing to turn us away, not quite, but we weren't going to improve matters by wandering through the scene, whatever had happened.

"Martin," I said, calling over my shoulder. "Time to get going."

He was slouched in the doorway of the powerhouse, head on his folded arms. Sometimes nothing I do is right. Parenting means being doomed to fail your child, over and over. You just try to leaven enough successes in to propel them into the future.

I knew how Grandfather Sequey must have felt.

"Come on, kid." I walked over, gently nudged his foot with mine. "We can stop in Troutdale at Tad's. Eat and watch the beavers."

He only grunted, but he came with me to the bike.

The superconductor that carries Bonneville's power eastward Portland is a black strip about ten centimeters wide in the middle of the I-84 trail. It's moot now, the whole idea of the grid is obsolete, but the infrastructure was replaced in phases, so until the line microturbines wear out, this part of the Columbia Gorge will have a huge excess of power. The bike followed the dark ribbon of electricity home, Martin and me pedaling and not talking much.

It's our world, I thought. He doesn't know how lucky he is, that boy of mine. Southern California was a broken concrete desert, while the Rust Belt cities were empty, iced-over shells. Here in the Northwest we had more power than we needed and the fish ran free on the river once more. Here in the Northwest my kid could walk under the open sky safe and happy.

We were talking again by the time the waiter brought us chicken and dumplings at Tad's. The food steamed hot and salty, with the rich, fat odor of chicken broth, and looked at least as good as it smelled. The gossip in the place was about a dead salmon back at Bonneville, big as a beluga whale.

"Do you suppose it was Grandfather Sequey, Dad?"

"No." The body, whatever it had been, wasn't any bigger than a man. Not from what I'd seen atop the edge of the dam. "It really was a story, kid."

His face fell. "She believed it."

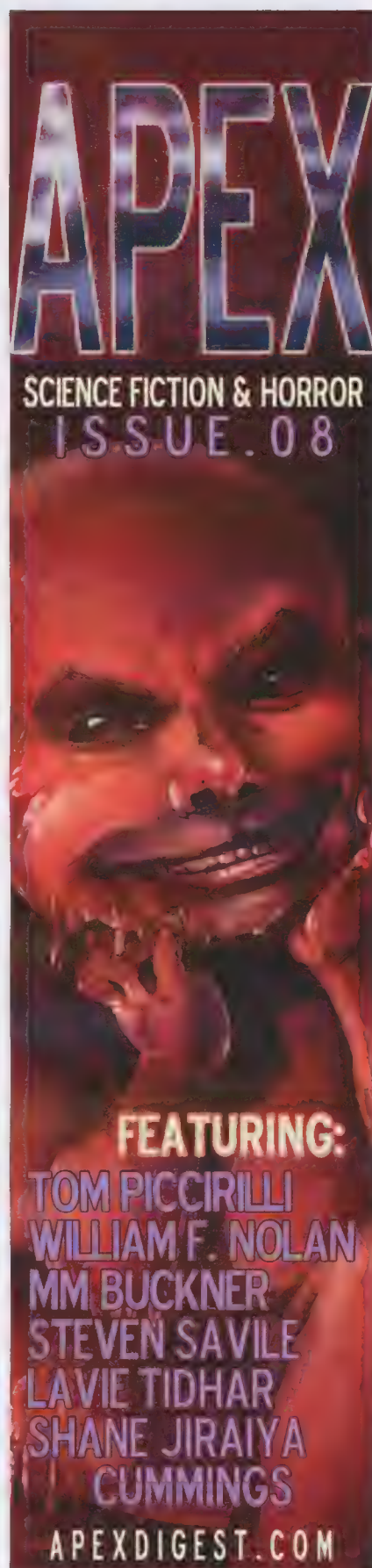
I stared out at the Sandy River for a moment. Beavers were chewing down an aspen even as we ate. Must be a lodge somewhere nearby. "I believe it," I said slowly. I remembered the first half of the century all too well.

"But you said it was only a story."

"Just because it's only a story doesn't mean it's not true." I picked up my water glass. "To Grandfather Sequey, may he live forever."

"Live forever," said Martin with a grin.

If the salmon king was dead, well, long live the king. I knew he would have passed his mother's words on to another fingerling. Salmon still ran, the river still flowed and somewhere the water still met the sky. ▣



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ISLINGTON CROCODILES

story **Paul Meloy** ■ **Vincent Chong** image

1 Ray Cade was enjoying his favourite dream.

He was one of a large crowd of people thronging the wings of a medieval cloister. The clothes of those around him reflected the rustic pageantry of the age; Ray wasn't having any of it. He was in his Burton's whistle. Charcoal grey. Cream shirt, no tie. Good shoes. Ray looked up at the lush tapestries that hung on the walls. Nice touch, he thought.

A red carpet ran the length of the stone floor until it reached the throne at the back of the room. A ginger-haired, rarefied-looking young man sat on the throne. He was going "mmmm" and "ahhhh" as he perused a seemingly endless parade of naked young women who were presenting themselves to him. Utterly absorbed in his delectation of this glossy harem, his eyes bugged out and his lower lip lolled away from his teeth, a damp, fleshy semi-circle revealing gum-recession and a faint, floury mottling of thrush.

Ray frowned. *Look at that saucy ponce up there getting all the class bush. That's my taxes paying for all that*, he fumed with resentful proletarian ire (although, fair to say, Ray and the Inland Revenue hadn't done any official business in a long while).

Ray stepped out of the shadow of a marble column and marched up the centre of the carpet. There was a hush; Ray grinned and pulled his gun. He shot the

king in the teeth.

The king's lower jaw atomized. The potted remains of his head popped up like a butterfly bomb. The crown lifted and fell. The king's perished head dropped back and sat at a quizzical angle on the stump of his neck. The big watery blue eyes regarded Ray with utter disbelief. Ray wondered whether the king's actual brain was still going in there. He grinned savagely and wagged the muzzle of his gun at it. He looked around at the adoring faces of the birds. Some of them were quite famous, he observed. *"I'm the fucking king now!"* he bellowed. The crowd roared.

Ray loved this dream. When he awoke from it, sweaty and hard, he couldn't get it out of his head all day. Ray *dwelled* on it.

In this dream, Ray Cade had arrived.

.....
"Yes, Ma," said Steve Iden as he listened to his little Dutch mother nuzzle him about all the things she felt he ought to be doing with his life. This did not include, among other things, working for a gangster and smuggling bukkake DVDs into London from a lockup on the outskirts of Amsterdam. Steve could see where she was coming from, although when you make a point of visiting your mother after a five month hiatus to make sure the old girl's doing all right, intending to catch up on family business and maybe leave her a couple of hundred under your tea

cup to help her out until next time, you don't expect her to go through your bag the moment your back's turned; she might have been looking for dirty shirts but Steve thought he would never forget the feeling, on walking out of the bathroom to find his ma staring at the cover of a DVD depicting a woman getting *that* done to her. Shame, Steve felt. It was, even Steve had to admit, *disgraceful* material.

Steve made sure he was on the three o'clock ferry early. He went straight to the bar and took a seat at the counter. He ordered a pint of Guinness and three packets of Bovril crisps. He had a good view out across the harbour and spent the next hour watching Holland recede as the ferry chugged into the North Sea. He was aware of an unsettled feeling, a free-floating cloud of anxiety churning in his belly. It was a constant distraction and he knew it would not abate until he had seen Ray and confronted him with his news. He picked at his crisps.

Eight hours later Steve strolled down the canopied walkway and out onto a dark, wet Harwich jetty. He tossed his bag over his shoulder, having negotiated customs with the insouciant ease of someone who has backpacked through Asia financing the trip by way of prankish near-death drug runs.

Dawlish and Gadd were hovering at the rear of their dark blue transit, sharing a cigarette. Dawlish was about fifty, Gadd

younger but enfeebled by drink. They both regarded Steve's approach with suspicion. Dawlish let out a heavy curtain of smoke through his nose so that it drifted up and concealed his coarse, narrow face and tiny, stoat eyes. He was so imbued with practised malevolence that he seemed to transcend real menace and now merely did a good impersonation of himself twenty years ago. He ground his cigarette out, oblivious to Gadd's outstretched hand and subsequent look of dumb disappointment.

Dawlish brandished a guarded, sideways expression at Steve and held out a hand knuckled like a bag of new potatoes.

Steve shrugged and slouched the bag off his shoulder. He swung it into Dawlish's grabbing fist. Dawlish shoved the bag at Gadd, scowled at Steve and walked off round to the driver side. Gadd stood blinking, clutching the bag against his chest and stared at Steve over the handles.

"No peeking, Brian," Steve said. "You'll go blind."

Gadd snorted, possibly with disdain, although Steve thought probably not; disdain was too sophisticated an emotion for Brian Gadd. His repertoire didn't extend much beyond a species of sly spite; it was probably just a cold.

Steve went to the back of the transit, opened the rear door and climbed in. Gadd got into the passenger seat and buckled up. Dawlish glanced at Steve in the rear view mirror and as he did so the entire cab lit up.

"Arsehole!" Dawlish spat, turning his head away from the glare of the high beams. Steve leant forwards and squinted through the windscreen but could see nothing beyond but bright light. *Customs?* he thought, rather more curious than alarmed. After all, Gadd had the bag. Job done in Steve's opinion.

Steve slid-waddled to the back of the van and opened the doors. He stepped out into the cold and drizzling night.

"Where are you fucking going?" Dawlish said.

Off on my toes, Steve thought. "I'll get a B&B," Steve said. "I'll take a raincheck on the lift. Thanks anyway, boys." And flicked the bill of his baseball cap in a farewell salute.

"Get back in here, you cheeky little cunt," Dawlish hissed.

"Yeah, *you cunt*," Gadd contributed, emboldened with reflected bravery. He was still mindlessly clutching the bag of porn beneath his chins like a nosebag full of ordure.

Steve turned, a big grin on his face. "Give

my regards to Ray," he said and made to set off across the car park.

"Now where would you be going in such a hurry, young man?" a deep voice said, and a large and heavy hand came down on his shoulder.

Steve span round, loosening the grip. He stumbled and slipped on the tarmac, lost his balance, and even as he was falling to his arse on the wet ground, he recognized the voice and was laughing as rainwater soaked into the seat of his pants.

"Who are you?" Ray asked with customary disrespect for formalities. He was addressing a pair of Doctor Marten's sticking out from beneath the sink.

"Plummer," the boots replied in a deep voice with a complete deficiency of irony.

"I asked you your name, not your fucking trade," Ray said in a tone he was developing to address menials with both economy and pressure.

The long legs attached to the burgundy boots unhinged and a torso slid from beneath the sink. Muscular arms reached up and huge hands gripped the underside of the sink unit, pulling a pair of shoulders equipped with a close-cropped and unsmiling head out of the recess. The man sat on the lino looking up at Ray.

"My *name's* Plummer," he said. He held a wrench between his fingers like a small steel bone. There was a scar running from the corner of his left eye to the dark comma of his flared left nostril.

To give him his due, Ray stood firm.

"And I'd bet my minimum wage that you're the troublesome little fucker they call Ray Cade," Plummer said.

"Now, you didn't hear that in ward round?" Ray said. He extended his hand.

Plummer spent a moment appraising the young man standing in the kitchen before him. Tall for his age. Far too much time spent on his hair. Imbued with a fuckload of charisma and self-assurance. An untreatable little shit bound for either great things or chaotic self-destruction. He'd seen them come though here before: arrogant, conceited, full of embryonic magnetism but never with anything coming close to this level of poise and authority. Plummer smiled.

Matty bounded into the kitchen. "Come on, Ray! Meeting!" Ray held his tongue. He winked at Plummer. "I could use you," he said.

They shook. And the rest, as they say...

"Plummer, you nearly made me shit

myself," Steve said, laughing.

"I'm not responsible for your feelings," Plummer said. He reached down to help Steve up off the wet ground.

"I don't *feel* like shitting," Steve said. "You're responsible for setting off an autonomic reaction. I've *got* a fucking mobile."

"Switch it on, then, Mr Missed-fucking-messages."

"Ah," Steve said. "Never have it on going through customs."

"Right. Ray's got a job for you."

Steve wiped his hands over the sodden denim covering his backside. He flicked grit and water from his palms. "I've just got back," he said. "Can't someone else go?"

Plummer grinned. "It's a London job. You get the night off. Then it's on."

Steve looked up at Plummer's grinning face and sighed. If Ray had sent Plummer there was little point in playing the overworked card.

"What's the job?" Steve asked.

Plummer's grin grew wider. "We're going to do the Bank of China," he said.

Steve stood on the kerb outside the Bank of China on Cannon Street. He was cold and tired and was having trouble believing they were actually going to do this.

He watched with something like amazement as a bright yellow digger trundled its way through the morning traffic, orange bubble flashing on the cab roof. Be conspicuous, Ray had said, and no fucker will take any notice of you. Plummer nudged him and handed Steve a yellow hard hat.

"Put this on," he said.

Plummer turned and unfolded a low three-sided metal barrier, which he propped up on the pavement against the wall of the bank. There was a grille set in the wall and behind it a recess containing what looked like a large piece of gray, porous rock. Plummer was setting out a few Men Working triangles and a couple of cones for good measure.

He looked up and saw that the digger had arrived. It sat at the side of the road, chugging idly. Jason Spicer sat in the cab. He lit a cigarette and nodded to Plummer and Steve. He looked pretty wired.

A stream of pedestrians wound around them, intent on other business, heads full of pressures real and imagined, eyes not seeing details, just scanning for proximity, speed, predators, a kind of primitive visual processing that would enable them to reach their destinations without the need to flesh



ATTACK OF THE TOYCEIVERS



NURSE MELT

out the world around them; they were passing through a pencil sketch of lines and angles and little else. Steve felt oddly displaced: subjectively more substantial because of his involvement in this brazen operation, yet consequently transparent to the masses because of it. He shook his head. The yellowness of the hard hat felt like a beacon howling for attention. He sank back into a species of watchful self-possession, which he hoped would allow the bald-faced deception to continue without triggering a 'what the fuck are *you* doing?' response from any moderately alert passer-by. It was like he was trying to keep a plane in the air just by thinking hard enough about it. Or perhaps it was more than that; Steve felt he was currently solely responsible for keeping the Earth from breaking orbit and swivelling off into the sun.

Plummer took him by the elbow and led him a few steps away from the barrier.

"Steve," he said. "We're going to do it now, right. Once it's out you and Spicer take it and go. You go to the station and get on the first tube out of here. Two or three stops and then get out onto the street. Get a cab to Ray's and we'll see you there."

Steve nodded. It was a thoughtful nod. "What about the digger?" he asked.

"We leave it," Plummer said. "I'll disappear. See you at Ray's. Like I said."

Steve spent a second scrutinising Plummer's expression. There was no indication on this configuration of features that what he was asking was as absurd as it sounded. In fact, Steve found himself thinking, with something close to wonder, that the expression on Plummer's face could most closely be defined as serene.

Plummer smiled and the digger started to grumble into action. Steve turned and saw that Jason Spicer was grappling with the levers in an attempt to swing the toothed scoop around so that it could hang over the pavement in preparation to take a crack at the wall of the bank.

"This is never going to work," Steve said mostly to himself. "We'll never get away with it."

Plummer squeezed his arm. "Listen," he said. "Once Ray's got it, it won't matter what we leave behind. We won't have to worry about anything. Nobody's going to be able to touch us."

Steve felt sucked in, stuck trembling against the mouth of something far out of his control. He thought that this might be the most ill advised thing he had ever agreed to take part in. He tried to focus. Think about it, Steve, he groped. The worst

you can get is wanton vandalism on a surreal scale. Two years, with your record? Maybe six months. You can do that again. He squared his shoulders and watched as Spicer threw the levers and the digger butted its jagged head into the side of the bank.

Steve winced. The digger smashed through the grille. Spicer manipulated the levers, an expression of one in the throes of creating high art on his face. The grille screamed and pulled free from the wall in a cloud of concrete. The grille was dragged down against the pavement and sprang free from the digger's teeth. It clattered to the ground. A group of pedestrians had stopped to watch, Steve noticed, snapped out of their blind passage.

The digger reared back and thrust forward into the recess. It came away in a cloud of rock dust. It shot forward again and this time the stone came out with it.

Steve felt he was currently solely responsible for keeping the Earth from breaking orbit and swivelling off into the sun

"Go!" said Plummer. Steve felt himself propelled towards the digger's scoop. He stumbled across the pavement, dimly aware that the cab door was open and Spicer was climbing out carrying a large hessian sack.

"Shut up, or the next voice you hear is gonna be your physiotherapist's."

A pause.

"Shut up, or the next voice you hear is gonna be your *speech* therapist's."

Ray Cade was practising his menaces. They were out in the smoking area. Ray was pacing about with his fists clenched. Steve was rolling a cigarette.

"What do you think?" Ray asked. "Which one?"

Steve lit his roll-up. "You could vary them," he suggested.

Ray considered this.

"You don't want to sound like a cunt," Ray said. "You've got to get this stuff right or they'll just laugh at you. Then you're finished."

Ray was getting pumped up. His face was as tight and pink as a phimosis.

Steve found himself wondering why Ray was so bothered by etymology; his expression alone was sufficient to induce panic.

Matty sprang genially onto the patio. "Meeting!" he said.

Ray rounded on him. He smiled. "Shut up," he said, "or..."

They sat in a circle in the Meeting Room. Thirteen chairs supported twelve Adolescent Unit inpatients and a staff nurse. Ten of the allocated thirty minutes had elapsed in silence. Ray sighed and looked around at his fellow patients. Opposite sat a couple of girls with their knees up and their faces hidden behind lank curtains of hair. Next to them a fifteen-year-old boy with white face make-up and rings of black eyeliner sat staring at his boots.

"Look at that poor cunt," Ray contributed to the group. "If you could sell shit, he wouldn't have an arsehole!" He brayed a coarse bout of laughter, sat back and stared at the ceiling. "Dear oh fucking dear."

"It sounds like you're quite angry, Ray," Matty facilitated, ashen-faced.

Ray blinked. He turned his head minimally in Matty's direction. "Angry?" he said. "I fear you may be projecting. I've

never been happier in my fucking life!"

Steve helped Spicer lift the chunk of stone out of the scoop. Spicer had put the sack on the ground with the neck wide open. They placed the stone into the sack and pulled the material up and over it.

"Can you manage?" Spicer asked.

Steve shrugged. He felt light-headed. He looked around for Plummer, but he had disappeared. It was just the two of them, standing outside the Bank of China, and by now people were starting to emerge from the bank with questioning expressions on their faces.

Steve took the neck of the sack and twisted it into his fists. He straightened and lifted the sack. It was heavy but he reckoned he could make it down the road to the tube station as long as he wasn't in a chase. He turned, flipped the hard hat off his head and began staggering down Cannon Street.

Spicer kept alongside him, throwing glances back towards the gathering crowd outside the bank. People were pointing at them.

"Fuckin' hell, Steve," Spicer moaned. "We're going to get stitched."

Steve grimaced. "Get hold of this sack and help me."

They had reached the entrance to the underground. Ahead were a short concourse and a set of stairs. The sound of an inexpertly handled penny whistle piped

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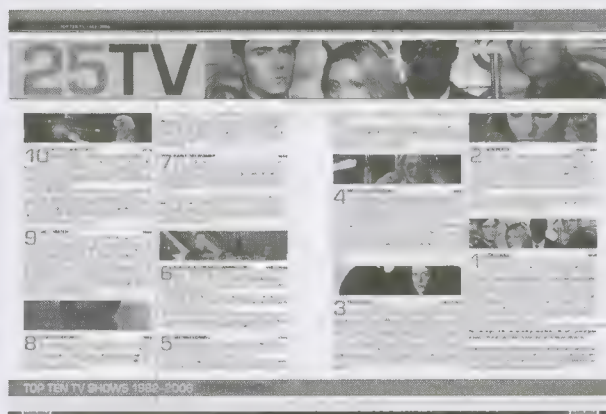
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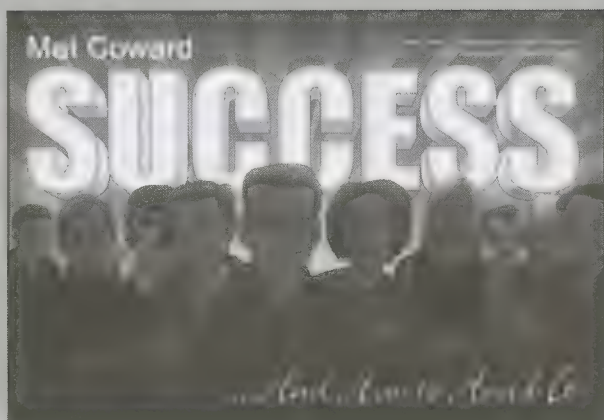
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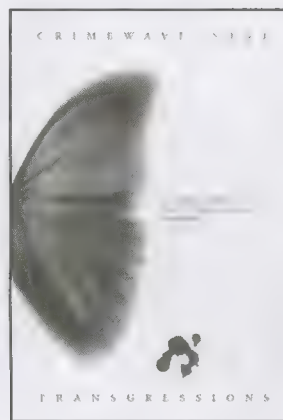
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- Issue 209 is out in March and it's our 25th anniversary issue
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- Interviews with Michael Moorcock and Hal Duncan
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up from the stairwell, emanating from the pitch of a busker presumptuously assuming that a few tootled notes connoted sought after and rewardable street entertainment.

Steve and Spicer staggered to the top of the steps. Behind them came the sudden and diuretic whoop of a police siren. Steve swung round just as Spicer ran into him.

"Shit!" said Steve, and lost his balance. He felt the momentum of the stone swing out into the stairwell and pull him helplessly towards the drop. The sirens were multiplying. Steve's knees buckled. Spicer clutched at him but succeeded only in swiping him round the back of the neck. Steve grunted and let go of the sack.

.....
Tostig Kemp heard the sirens and paused with the tin whistle to his lips. He looked up and saw two men arseing about at the top of the steps. He was sitting cross-legged on a woollen blanket with a small

around and appraised the gathering crowd.

"Has anyone phoned an ambulance?" he asked the group of white and uncertain faces gathered around the body. Galvanized by Steve's trick authority, mobile phones were fumbled into activity.

Steve looked down at the corpse. The weight of the stone was becoming unsupportable. The muscles in his shoulders were burning. He hoisted it into a clumsy hug and began to back away from the crowd. Jason Spicer appeared at Steve's side.

"Is he...?"

"He most certainly is," Steve said. He felt sick. He could see the mouthpiece of the tin whistle projecting from the base of the busker's skull.

"It was an accident, wasn't it?" Jason said.

"Yeah. An accident," Steve said. His mouth was filling with saliva. "Let's get out of here."

They stumbled away from the crowd

history. At our age. You got any forensic and people get twitchy. You need to go down the Mental Health route. Get a trick-cyclist involved, get a Social Worker, lovely! Blame your inclinations on traumatic past experiences. Learn the language; my behaviour is a maladaptive coping mechanism perpetuated and maintained by my inability to regulate my emotional responses to fuckin' *blah blah blah*. You should hear the pony that little wanker trots out during our *individual time*." Ray made a rapid onanist gesture with a loosely clenched fist. "Total bollocks."

They were in Ray's room, the biggest of the twelve inpatient rooms along the main corridor of the Adolescent Unit. Plummer was leaning against the sink, ostensibly there to empty the bin should a member of staff put their head in, but actually attending Ray's every utterance with the joy of the newly enfolded acolyte.

cardboard box in front of him. A sign was propped up against his knees: HOMELESS AND HUNGARY. There was the grand total of eight pence and a piece of chewing gum in the box. He was wearing a little red hat with a bell on it and had a threadbare shawl around his shoulders.

"Damn filth," he thought, which just about amounted to his last experience of conscious neuronal activity because a second later a large hessian sack containing a lethal amount of mass flew from the hands of one of the men, hit the bottom step and bounded up into his face.

Tostig Kemp's final musical output consisted of a harsh and bubbling *poot!* as the whistle was rammed between his teeth and out of the back of his head. The stone dropped into his lap, fractured his pelvis and ruptured his testicles. Had he been alive, the pain would probably have been sufficient enough to kill him.

Tostig's head lolled forward and a glut of dark blood slid from the end of the pipe like oil from the nozzle of a can. It splashed onto the exposed and channelled chunk of stone lodged between his knees.

.....
Steve stood over the slumped body. Around him commuters were milling. Someone had screamed, which was a bit of a pisser. It drew attention.

Steve reached down and pulled the sack off the busker's dislocated lap. He looked

and headed down the green tiled corridor. Steve could hear the hiss and vibration of a train arriving at the platform ahead and tried to double their speed. They had to make this train.

They lurched onto the platform. Steve heard the warning beep as the doors prepared to close and threw himself at the carriage. They piled in just as the doors slid together. The train shuddered and pulled away.

Steve hated tubes. He hated the cold fireplace smell of the platforms and the thundering insanity of the train's mindless, rocking pelt through the decaying London substructure. It was a sensation more akin to dropping down a shaft than travelling horizontally; he felt hemmed and jolted, a cheek bite away from panic.

He dumped the sack between his feet and leaned back against a partition, breathing hard. Spicer was staring down at the stone.

"What is it, Steve?" he asked, his expression quaintly fearful. "What's Ray want with a piece of old rock?"

Steve shook his head. The neck of the bag had collapsed around the stone and Steve could see the dark bloodstain soaked into the top of the porous rock. He bent and tugged the hessian back over it, grimacing. "I don't know," he said, "perhaps he's finally gone insane."

.....
"What you want to avoid is a forensic

He was spending more and more time with Ray, sharing a fag outside now and then, whispered conversations in the kitchen; Ray was grooming him. Steve sat in a chair beneath a large black and white poster of the Kray twins. He was far less credulous, having recovered well from a nasty little drug induced psychosis that had necessitated this particular three-month admission. No Section, fortunately. He'd been only too glad to get away from the mealworms and all the little black bubbles, thanks very much.

He did find Ray's antics entertaining, though, and had struck up a kind of sidekick relationship with him over the last month since Ray had arrived on the unit. It was more a tribute to Steve's easygoing and personable charm that he had attained some sort of unobtrusive equality with Ray, which suited him just fine, and which he had no intention of pushing too hard. Steve knew he was smarter than Ray, knew it pretty soon into the relationship, but was also canny enough to recognise someone with enough power to create a dark and intriguing wake in which to follow and observe.

And then there was Claire, Ray's sister.

.....
They could endure no more than two stops along the line, both expecting hordes of police to come pouring onto the train and arrest them at each station, or for the

train to stop at the platform with the doors mechanically secured until reinforcements arrived, the driver having been informed over the radio that there were inept felons on board his train. But nothing happened, and they both alighted at Blackfriars without being apprehended and made it out of the station and into an overcast London street that was not teeming with police cars, coppers with guns and megaphones and cordoned off television crews.

Steve heard Jason mutter, "Fucking Radio Rental!" and then he saw a taxi idling in a rank and they made their way over to it.

"Islington Green, mate," Steve said as they slid into the back. The stone sat between them, wrapped in its sack.

"What you got, there, mate?" the driver asked, eyeing the bundle. He looked Greek, or Turkish, and smelled of something congruently ethnic.

"A dead horse with a hat on," Steve said through clenched teeth. "Can we go? Please?"

And thought, as the driver pulled out into heavy rush hour traffic, *Why the fuck have we just nicked the Stone of London?*

Ray's flat was a large two-bed apartment above an antiques and bric-a-brac shop called Buy Curios on the Islington Green high street owned by a couple of *Tchaikovsky*s in matching purple pullovers named Trev and Vince. The theme of the flat was minimalist; a low table, two auburn leather sofas and a Bang & Olufsen stereo were the only objects in the room. Ray was standing with his back to the window. Steve, Spicer, Dawlish and Gadd were sitting on the sofas while Plummer made tea in the kitchen off the hall. Steve could hear him whistling.

Ray walked across to the table. The stone sat in its centre. Ray regarded it with an expression that Steve thought was possibly one of the most disturbing he had ever seen on Ray's face; it was a base combination of greed and desire, hinting at a kind of possessiveness which might cause him to lash out and kill anyone mad enough to try and take the Stone from him.

"Scuse me," Steve said and got up. He went into the kitchen and leaned against the worktop. Plummer lifted a couple of tea bags out of the pot with a spoon and lobbed them into a bin beneath the sink. He was still whistling.

"We'll be on the news by now," Steve said. Plummer grinned.

"No matter," he said. He went to the

fridge to fetch milk.

Steve was beginning to feel a little downcast. The adrenaline rush was long gone and he was finding this whole scenario mildly upsetting. "Do you actually know what's going on?"

Plummer splashed milk into an assortment of mugs. "Yes, I do," he said.

"Plummer," Steve said, "we've known each other for a long time. Will you stop being so enigmatic and tell me why Ray got us to steal an artifact of historical interest and why he's so fucking entranced by it?"

Plummer said, "Ray's been doing a bit of research. He's discovered an interest in his family tree. It's enlightened him somewhat. Given him big ideas."

"Ray doesn't read," Steve said, "do you see anything other than DVDs on his bookcase? He's interested in petty crime and coercion. Not particularly improving pastimes."

Steve could see Ray standing by the table. He was holding what looked like a broadsword in both hands

"Not reading, Steve. *Research*. Talking to people, listening. Gathering information."

Steve frowned. Ever since he had met him at the Adolescent unit, he had known that Ray harboured dreams of criminal magnitude. Unfortunately, his lack of genuine imagination or perhaps his poor choice in cronies, sidekicks, gofers and allies – or a combination of both – had perpetuated a career of relatively small time operations. Enough to get by on but not enough to make much of a ripple in the underworld and assure him his place in the pantheon of gangland giants. At this rate there would be no garish paperback biography of Ray's life for sale in the supermarkets, full of tabloid literacy and exclamation marks, and illustrated with black and white photos of Ray giving it large in a diversity of resorts and bars, arms around darts players and waning comedians and enjoying a glass of wine with the lovely wife. No, Ray needed to get cracking if he was going to start enjoying the big time.

"That stone is the London Stone. It contains the life force of the City itself. It's said that whoever owns it has the power of the entire City at their disposal. It has not escaped me that it found its way into the wall of a bank, finance being at the heart of London's strength."

"What's this got to do with Ray?" Steve lowered his voice. He could hear Ray

talking in the lounge, his voice urgent and excited. He was asking Gadd to fetch something.

"It's his name and his destiny," Plummer said. "I've always been intrigued by it. Cade and the Stone are connected. Do you know your history, Steve?"

Steve shrugged. "I never applied myself," he said.

"Have you heard of Jack Cade and his rebellion in 1450?" Plummer asked. Steve shook his head.

"Well, you should look it up," Plummer said. "*So long as the stone of Brutus is safe, so long shall London flourish.*"

"Where'd you get this sword from, Ray?" Gadd asked.

Steve started. "What the fuck?" he said, and leaned his head out of the kitchen.

Steve could see Ray standing by the table. He was holding what looked like a broadsword in both hands. Steve walked

down the hall and went into the lounge.

He was dimly aware that Plummer had followed him up the hall and was standing just behind him, sipping his cup of tea, and then Ray lifted the sword – an ancient looking, pitted and rusty weapon – over his head and brought it down onto the stone like an executioner practising a beheading.

"I'm the Lord of London!" Ray shouted.

Jason Spicer let out a jumpy giggle. Dawlish and Gadd sat next to each other on the sofa. Gadd looked like he wanted to hold someone's hand.

"Ray?" Steve said, but felt Plummer lay a hand on his shoulder. He half turned. Plummer put a finger to his lips, and then pointed at Ray.

Steve looked.

"I'm the fucking king now!" Ray roared.

2 Claire visited every Saturday although it was clear that Ray despised her.

Ray's father would drop her off outside the unit and then drive off down the pub for an hour while Claire went in, announced herself to the nurse in charge and then went to spend some time with her brother. She brought cigarettes, magazines, drinks, posters, CDs, sweets. Ray took it all, and then blanked her for the duration of her stay. She'd follow him around, chatting, encouraging, trying to touch him, but Ray just stalked off and sat in the smoking area until she left. She only brought him a book

once, Steve recalled, and this had induced a dreadful rage, giving Claire grounds to run for cover as he ripped it up and threw it at her: "*How to Kill a Mocking Bird*? What do I want a fucking book for you stupid little cow? Fuck off. Don't bring me fucking books again or I'll pull your tiny tits off!"

Even Steve was mortified by Ray's reaction and followed Claire to the door as she left. She was crying again.

Steve looked at her as she fumbled with the door handle. She was tall and slender, with long, slim legs which seemed to pole forever from beneath a short denim skirt. She had a shoulder-length bob that framed her pretty, gentle face. Her hair was thick and glossy and Steve found himself wondering what it would feel like to run his fingers through it.

"Are you okay?" Steve asked, knowing immediately that many other, less cuntish, openers might have been employed. He

becoming a toxic influence on the Unit. His behaviour was becoming problematic; he was disrespectful, arrogant and was swanning around like he ran the place. Matty was still off sick and considering pressing charges for assault. Ray's Consultant vacillated; Ray was still talking about vague suicidal ideation during their meetings and she felt he continued to pose a significant risk. His depressive symptoms seemed to have cleared up quite quickly but there was still this nagging self-harm. She decided it would be best to review it next week and in the meantime chase up the referral to the Therapeutic Community in Brighton and allocate him a Social Worker.

Ray was laughing. This was one system he knew how to play.

"Why does he hate you?" Steve asked. Ray had snatched the *Viz*, *GQ* and Marlboro lights from his sister and had gone off to the

of his mother. Classic. I've done a bit of reading. You don't think I'd put up with his shit without understanding him, do you?"

"No," Steve said, "I guess not." Claire was smiling.

A car honked its horn in the car park.

"There's Dad," Claire said and stood up.

"Er," said Steve.

"Er what?" asked Claire. She slung her pink handbag over her shoulder. She smiled at him. Steve was convinced he was cherry-red; he felt hot and congested.

"Next week, if Ray doesn't want to see you, perhaps you and I could go into town for a Coke and a bite to eat," Steve didn't actually say. He said instead, "Next week. See you next week, then. Claire."

"Sure," she said, and stepped past him. The soft skin of her forearm brushed against Steve's bicep. Steve felt his pupils dilate. "You can take me out for a cup of tea or something, if you like," she added as she

offered her a slack grin by way of apology.

Claire looked up and nodded. She had large grey-blue eyes. "I'm okay," she said, sounding extremely resigned, and sighed.

"Do you want a Coke?" Steve offered, growing in sophistication. "Or a biscuit?"
Oh you cock!

Claire smiled and her eyes shone with sudden good humour. "No thanks, Steve. I gotta go. See you next week." She pushed open the door and left Steve thinking two things: Steve. She called me Steve. She knows who I am. And: Next week? How am I going to wait that long?

The week dragged. Steve tried every trick he knew to get Ray to tell him about Claire but Ray would only become morose or abusive. Steve didn't want to raise his suspicions, so eventually he dropped the subject. By the end of the week he knew three things about Claire: She was nearly fifteen, three years younger than Ray, she had killed their mother, and Steve was crazy about her.

That was also the week Ray twatted Matty.

Matty had challenged Ray about his relationships during their weekly individual time. Something innocuous, like *how do you feel about losing your mother?* and Ray had gone over the desk at him. It was decided in ward round that Ray wasn't really addressing his issues and was

coffee shop in town where he would meet up with an off-duty Plummer and get his weekly cannabis supply. Claire was sitting in the lounge with Steve. She was wearing a pink, strappy T-shirt which showed off her pale shoulders and the intriguing indentations above her collarbones, blue jeans and a pair of sandals with large, black, sharp-looking plastic daisies on the insteps.

Claire shrugged. She looked pale and tired today. "He hates me because Mum died giving birth and he hates Dad because he told the surgeons to prioritise my survival over hers. Simple really. Don't blame him, he was only little and he lost his Mum. 'I needed Mum, not a sister!' he'd say. He still says it. It's fucked him up royally."

Steve stared at her. "It wasn't your fault," he said. *Biscuit?* he thought, feeling lame.

"Yeah, it was," Claire said. "It was absolutely my fault. You can say I didn't mean to do it, but it *was* my fault. Ray's always blamed me and probably always will, but he's my brother and I love him."

"He's been here a while," Steve said, "Maybe he'll come to terms with it."

Claire shook her head. Her hair rocked softly against her shoulders. Steve squinted. "He's a psychopath," she said.

Steve sat back, moderately aghast. "That's a bit harsh," he said.

"Not really," Claire said. "He's got a personality disorder connected to a developmental trauma following the death

opened the door.

"Give me your mobile number!" Steve blurted.

"No way!" Claire said, laughing, and left the building.

"Don't talk to my fucking sister!" Ray said.

This caught Steve off balance. "What?"

"You heard me, I don't want you talking to that little bitch, all right? Leave her alone."

Steve decided to play it cautious. This was the first time Ray had turned on him; up until now he had enjoyed a favourable measure of immunity from Ray's capricious wrath. He didn't want that to change.

"Okay," he said, and felt like a dismal coward. "Only trying to be friendly."

Ray glared at him across the pool table. He stroked in an easy red. "Well, don't be fucking friendly, okay?"

Steve saluted him with his cue. "Consider it done," he said. "I won't talk to her on the ward again." Which was easy to say, now that he had Claire's mobile number.

A fortnight later, Ray went down to Brighton to be assessed for admission to a Therapeutic Community. To the relief of the Adolescent Unit staff, Ray was accepted and swift transfer of care was arranged.

On the morning of Ray's departure, he and Steve were sharing a last cigarette out in the smoking area.

"This is going to be a fucking holiday," Ray said.

Steve blew a couple of smoke rings. "Hope you're right," he said. Ray had come back from the assessment full of ideas. He was going to lie low, play the game and start building his empire. "You'll be out of here in a few weeks yourself," Ray said. "I'll keep in touch and give you the nod when I've got something for you. Come down to the coast for a while and we'll see what happens."

Steve, seventeen years old and not much looking forward to the prospect of gainful employment, said, "Like a shot, Ray."

Ray flicked his cigarette across the lawn. "Right," he said and went inside to fetch his bags. Steve followed him down the corridor. The walls were decorated with posters of Kurt Cobain, Teletubbies and a selection of pitiful collages. Steve shook his head; this was one weird place to be perfectly honest.

Ray's walls were stripped of posters and his stereo was packed up in boxes. He picked up his bag and looked around. Steve leaned against the sink.

"Going to be quiet without you, Ray," Steve said. *And mildly less menacing*, he thought.

Ray pursed his lips. He seemed distracted, perhaps merely by the prospect of moving on but Steve thought it was probably nothing to do with anything sentimental, more likely a brief and almost unconscious evaluation of the progress of his plans to date.

They went out into the car park at the front of the building and Steve helped load Ray's gear into the back of a taxi. A nurse escort was already sitting in the front seat with a thick folder full of Ray's notes on his lap. Ray stuck out a hand.

"I'll be in touch," he said.

Steve shook Ray's hand. "Great. Good luck."

Ray climbed into the back of the taxi. Before he closed the door, he said, "And keep away from my fucking sister." He grinned and slammed the door.

Steve swallowed and made his features grin back.

Steve watched the car pull away, then turned and began to walk back around the side of the building into the garden.

He got out his mobile and called Claire. "Hi baby. Yeah, just now. Where do you want to meet?"

Steve stopped and looked around. He had the distinct feeling that he was being spied on. "Hang on," he said and walked back towards the smoking area. There was

a small window giving into the old sluice room, where Plummer kept his buckets and tools. Steve stood on tiptoes and peered in.

"Shit!" he said, and stumbled backwards as Plummer's long, pale face loomed up before him. Grinning, Plummer pressed his nose against the window, his breath fogging the glass. Steve stood panting on the lawn. His heart was racing. He could hear Claire's voice saying, "Steve? Are you all right?"

Steve looked up at the sluice room window. Plummer was gone. A faint nebula of condensation was drawing in on itself as it evaporated from the glass.

Steve lifted the mobile back to his ear. "I'm okay," he said. "Just Plummer fucking about. Let's meet up."

The next day, Steve was only mildly curious when he found out that Plummer hadn't turned up for work. By the end of the week he was baffled by his continued absence.

He was sitting next to a young woman in a business suit. She was pretty and smelt of expensive perfume

The following Monday a small man called Lawrence with alopecia and waxy ears was pushing a mop up the corridor, and Steve asked a nurse where Plummer was.

"The agency haven't heard from him for over a week," she said. "They've sent us a new chap. People don't stay in this job very long, Steve."

Steve pondered the small domestic as he walked back down the corridor to his room. Lawrence grinned. "All right?" he said.

"Yeah, I'm all right," Steve replied and went into his room. He shut the door and sat on his bed. Time to go, he thought. He could hear the mop slapping about outside his door accompanied by the sound of Lawrence's whistling. He felt restless. He got up and put his coat on, checked for cigarettes, then went back out into the corridor.

"Off out?" asked Lawrence, from behind Steve. Steve jumped.

He frowned. *Definitely* time to go.

Steve was discharged a fortnight later and got straight on a train to Sussex. His parents were divorced and his mum had moved back to Holland. His father was living in a Housing Association flat on an estate in Kent subsisting on sausage and chips and chemical cider. Steve was supposed to be staying with his dad but reneged on that part of the discharge plan because the thought of sitting in a roomful of busted

furniture with walls and ceiling the same colour as his father's fingers and nicotine-rinsed quiff for any length of time filled him with a horror verging on the atavistic.

Ray had called earlier the previous week to fill Steve in. He was having the time of his life. Three meals a day, gentle therapy, trips to the pub in the evenings and a Sunday carvery, vulnerable birds and a few *tender* blokes to lean on. Ray was playing the game.

Steve's mother had put some money in a building society for him. It wasn't much but enough to keep him going for a while if he was economical. Steve knew his mum wanted him to join her in Holland eventually, but he doubted that would figure in his plans. He needed to move around.

As the train approached Brighton, Steve looked out of the window. He was sitting next to a young woman in a business suit. She was pretty and smelt of expensive

perfume. Perhaps it was just the motion of the train, but Steve had spent a large part of the journey with his sports bag on his lap to conceal a wearisome and resolute boner.

He was about to have a rummage for some chocolate when his attention was drawn to something carved into the steep slope of a chalk hill beyond the passing fields. It was four o'clock in the afternoon and the carving shone as though illuminated in the low autumn sun. Even from a distance, Steve could see how tall the figure was. It was a faceless outline of a towering man holding two staves, one either side of his body.

"I go past him nearly every day and I never fail to get a little shiver."

"What?" said Steve.

The young woman pointed at the chalk figure. "The Long Man," she said. "There's something benign about him, isn't there? Something *protective*." Steve looked back at the figure. The train had passed it and the angle of the hillside was turning the Long Man away, seeming to make the staves draw together like a curtain.

"I guess," Steve said. "Kind of imposing, isn't he?"

The woman smiled and went back to her book.

Five minutes later the train drew into Lewes and the woman stood to get a bag down from the overhead rack. The sun was very low now, about to fall behind the

surrounding hills, and the carriage was filled with a sudden soft luminescence. Steve squinted up at the silhouette of the woman standing in the aisle. She appeared to be surrounded by a penumbra; her teardrop earrings gleamed like molten metal. Steve blinked and suddenly felt as though the rest of the world had been dashed from him in a bright and eerie faint. He felt weak and inexplicably fragile. *Flashback*, he thought, and felt panic rise in his chest. He looked down at his hands, expecting them to be gloved in black foam, the black foam, but they were unblemished.

Frightened now, Steve peered back up at the woman.

He saw her raise her arms and hold them out at her sides. She spoke, and her voice rang like a cluster of tiny bells.

"When the Great Instrument is found, the Long Man will come down from the hills."

There was a sharp squealing sound

Twenty minutes later the train rumbled over a viaduct and Steve got his first view of Brighton. He could see rows of narrow terraces and corner pubs, churches and winding lanes. It was choked with traffic. Everything was funnelling through the back roads towards the main drag on the front. There was a long promenade populated by huts and strings of lights; there were two piers, one dilapidated and neglected, the other vibrant as a fruit machine. Everything looked shabby and rakish.

Steve smiled. He could see the sea.

Ray met Steve at the station. A jumpy-looking little wretch whom Ray introduced as Jason Spicer accompanied him. Steve shook hands; Ray's grip was firm, but when Spicer put his hand in Steve's it felt like grabbing a handful of cigar butts out of an ashtray. Dry, brittle and unclean.

Ray had finished with therapy against

key from the bunch and slid it into the lock. "Up we go," he said and pushed open the door.

They climbed a staircase that led to an unlit landing. Spicer performed the palsied, metallic shuffle again, cupping the bunch in his fragile fists and rattling them like dice, until he brought forth another key.

They went into the flat.

.....
"It's a shit hole, babe," Steve laughed.

"There's damp like armpits in all the corners and it smells like a hamster's crotch. You know, I found a cockroach rattling around in the bath the size of an otter!"

"An otter?" Claire said. She was creasing up.

"It was so fucking *big*, Claire. I had to wrap it up in bog roll. Two hands full. It struggled. As I chucked it out of the window it hissed, 'I know people!'"

"God, it sounds like Ray."

and Steve thought the woman was shrieking, but then the train jolted and he realised it was the brakes halting the train at the platform's edge. The sun disappeared behind the station building and the carriage abruptly lost its uncanny, suspended radiance. Steve moaned.

"Are you okay?"

"Huh?" Steve said. His ears were ringing.

The woman bent down and looked at Steve with an expression of concern. She held her leather briefcase in one hand and a hefty looking holdall in the other. "You looked like you were about to pass out," she said.

Steve stared at her as other passengers began to press past. She grunted as a man in a bright red puffer jacket elbowed her into the gap between the seats. He was jabbering into a mobile phone.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Steve said and gave her a patented mild grin to reassure her. His heart was pounding in his chest and his throat felt constricted.

"Cool," she said and stepped out into the flow of disembarking commuters. She looked back, though, once, as she reached the doors and smiled. She moved her lips and was gone.

Steve slumped back into his seat, frowning.

It had looked like she had mouthed, "So long, man." And at the time that's what he chose to believe.

professional advice and had set himself up in a bedsit at the back of the North Lanes. It had never been about recovery for Ray.

"I've discharged myself," Ray said. "We're staying with Jason's brother."

Jason's brother was a stallholder in the Lanes. They strolled through the Lanes as everyone was packing up for the day. Steve crunched through market-stall debris and litter. People were loading trucks with wardrobes, Africanas, ceramic tiles, memorabilia, art deco. They reached an arcade filled with books, records. Spicer twitched, "I'll get the keys, Ray." He disappeared into the arcade, leaving Steve and Ray standing in the middle of the road.

"Where'd you find that widgerson?" asked Steve.

"He's a contact," said Ray. "He's useful."

"As a draught excluder?"

Ray grunted. "While you've been on your back with your hands in your boxers I've been circulating. Hasn't taken me long to meet a few people. We're having a get together tonight. You're going to be interested, Steve. Very fucking interested."

"No doubt about that," said Steve.

Spicer reappeared carrying a bunch of keys on a grimy yellow smiley-face fob. He rattled them under Ray's nose. "We're in!" he said.

Steve followed Ray and Jason through the Lanes until they reached a door at the side of a clothes shop. Spicer fumbled a Yale

"Aw fuck! Do you think I just caught Ray having a bath in his natural state and dumped him in an alley?"

"How embarrassing!"

"Yeah, what a *faux pas*. What a way to thank his hospitality!"

Steve was standing at the end of the pier. He'd excused himself on the pretext of getting a packet of cigarettes and had found himself walking towards the front. It was almost dark and the lights were enticing. He wandered through the Lanes and came out by the Pavilion. He walked up to the entrance to the Palace Pier. It was chilly and the sea roared and crashed against the beach. There were still a lot of people about and the bars and restaurants were getting full. Steve went onto the pier, looking down through the gappy planks at the foaming water. He could smell doughnuts and spicy food and the all-pervading bitterness of the sea. Gulls floated like smuts. Above the faded and speckled blue roofs of the amusement arcades starlings shoaled and folded like a dark rendering of coordinated longing.

He walked past the arcades and booths until he reached the end of the pier. He leaned against the flaking railings. There was a small jetty below and a stack of eroded machinery. A worn sign advertised seasonal fishing trips. Steve looked out across the bay. The lights of the hotels and boarding houses glimmered like garlands

all along the front.

Steve felt good. This was the new start he needed. Wherever things led from now on, he was in control. He took out his mobile and phoned Claire.

Steve walked back to the flat in a first-rate mood. He'd arranged to see Claire at the weekend and the plan was to try and get up to London at least once a week to spend an evening with her. He was desperate to see more of her but he also needed to keep Ray sweet and take on a few jobs, so he knew that, at least in the short-term, they would be apart for much of the time.

He let himself in through the street door and climbed the stairs. Ray had promised a get together of sorts, just an initial meeting of the gang over a few drinks and some smokes, but judging by first impressions, there didn't appear to be a whole lot to get excited about. The idea of Jason Spicer holding his bladder over anything bigger than selling weed to a school boy made Steve chuckle to himself in a most hearty way. He knocked on the landing door.

Spicer answered. "Where have you been?" he asked. "Ray's waiting."

Steve frowned and stepped into the flat. He followed Spicer down a narrow hallway. He could hear Ray's voice coming from the living room at the front of the flat, then a low, sardonic laugh that made the hairs on the back of his neck prickle.

"Well, stone me," Steve said as he entered the room.

Ray was standing smoking a joint by the door to the kitchen. He blew out a dense sinusful of smoke and handed the joint to the man sitting in an armchair to his left.

"Hello, Steve," said Plummer. "Nice of you to join us."

Jason's brother, Ginger Lee ("I might be blond, but I'm fucking *careful*!"), turned up an hour later with a paunchy Goth called Bambi – which was about the least Transylvanian moniker Steve had ever heard – and a greasy brown paper bag full of Chinese food. Bambi deflated into a tatty recliner and sat with her solid thighs apart revealing a taut, black Lycra gusset beneath the crumpled hem of her mini skirt. She sported a pale sebaceous node in the corner of her left eye about the size of a butterbean.

"Come on, lover, let's get out of the way," Lee said from the bedroom door. "I'm knackered. These boys want to get to know each other."

"Aw, I wanted some chinky," Bambi said, eyeing the brown paper bag. It was semi-

translucent from the grease. She ran a fat tongue across her black lipsticked chops.

"Save her some," Lee said to the rest of the room. "You can have it tomorrow, babe. I'll heat it up for breakfast. Come and have a nosh on my pork pagoda."

"Okay," Bambi mumbled, an acquiescence that was virtually lost in the immense, effortful expulsion of air she emitted as she heaved herself out of the recliner.

She must have a diaphragm like a fucking *dinghy*, Steve thought as he watched her sway across the sitting room and disappear into Lee's bedroom.

He returned his attention to the others. The room was full of smoke; it hung like a ghostly hammock halfway between floor and ceiling. Steve had refused to partake so soon after his admission, and the others were cordial enough to respect this.

Ray was talking.

Ray spun and brought the sword round in a high arc. Dawlish watched it coming but was too amazed to react

"So Plummer goes up to London and gets us digs on his old manor. Puts us in touch with a few people with a little bit more on their plates than they can handle and we take over a small operation. Nothing too flash to start off, just some easy money."

"When can we start, Ray?" Spicer asked. He was engulfed in a lumpy coffee-coloured beanbag. He looked like someone had stubbed him out in a rotten tangerine.

"Give me two weeks," Plummer answered.

Two weeks, thought Steve. That's pretty quick work. He thought about Claire. Both of them in London would be great. Things were progressing well.

"Two weeks," said Ray.

Six years later Claire said, "Steve, if you tell him, he'll kill you."

"He's going to find out," Steve said. "It's better if it comes from me."

Claire shook her head. Her eyes blazed. "He hasn't seen me since he came back from Brighton. I don't want that to change."

Steve paced back and forth across the dining room of his flat. "I should stop working for him," he said. "I should get a proper job."

"That's something we both agree on," Claire said. "What this hold is he has on people, I'll never know."

"It's just easy," Steve said, "he makes it easy to stay on board. There's always a job

to do. Trips abroad."

"It's exciting?"

"Yeah. It's exciting. And easy. God, I sound like a moron. I'll get a job."

Claire sat back and laced her fingers over her belly. "My man," she said. "In a suit."

Steve raised his eyebrows. "Fuck that, I was thinking more along the lines of lorry driving."

"Really?" said Claire. "You can't drive."

"I'll think of something. Lighthouse keeper, ambassador, weapons inspector."

Claire stood up and went over to him. She put her arms round his waist and kissed him.

"You do what ever you like," she said, smiling. "Just be a great dad, okay!"

3 Ray stood looking down at the stone. He was breathing heavily and had a sheen of perspiration on his brow. He held the handle of the sword in his right

hand, the tip of the long blade resting on the carpet between Gadd's feet. A lock of hair had fallen into his right eye. Spicer coughed, sat forward and peered at the stone. The sword had virtually split it in half; there was a large chunk out of it and a crack that jagged down to its base.

Steve looked around the room and tried to gauge the feelings betrayed on the faces of the men. Dawlish was sitting back on the sofa in the way someone with an aversion to dogs might had a large and aggressive-looking Alsatian just trotted in: body turned away, knees drawn up, expression hyper-vigilant, thin lips pursed with distaste. Gadd looked embarrassed. Spicer remained with his elbows propped on his knees, eyes darting from the stone to Ray and back to the stone and giving the impression he was restraining the urge to say something he would mortally regret in order to break the tumescent silence. It was a strange tableau depicting dwindling expectation and what might just prove to be bathos of career-ending magnitude.

Then the doorbell rang.

Plummer stepped past Steve and went downstairs to answer the door.

As swiftly as it had developed, the tension was broken; the peculiar, muffled quality of the atmosphere cleared and Steve realised he could hear the traffic again, as though his ears had popped. Everything

zoomed back in. Spicer twitched and said, "Now what, Ray?"

Ray Cade turned slowly, and the tip of the sword lifted until it was pointing an inch away from Spicer's left eye.

"Kneel before your King," Ray said, glaring. "In all fucking seriousness."

Steve edged towards the stairwell. He could hear footsteps ascending and the sound of the street door slamming. Dawlish was standing up. He looked like he might try and restrain Ray, but before he could step around the coffee table, Ray roared, "Kneel!" and jabbed the sword forward into Spicer's eye.

Spicer squealed and threw himself backwards, clutching at his face. The tip of the sword was blunt and rounded but the force of the blow had split Spicer's brow and no doubt bruised, scratched and deposited rust in his eyeball. Blood flowed

"You used it, Raymond. Good boy!"

Vince was nodding, his eyes wide and excited. "We've waited so long! Look at it, all broken, all *spent*!"

Ray looked suddenly perplexed. "You said use the sword on it. You said it was the key."

"Yes, yes, you did *fine*, Ray, just fine," said Vince and clapped Ray on the back.

"You said it would give me power."

Ray was starting to frown, his expression darkening. "You told me it would be *limitless*."

Vince laughed, a high girlish sound, and said, "We needed you to open it, Ray. Only you could do that," and as he spoke, it seemed that the quality of the light in the room changed, slipped down to a crude gloom, and his voice became low, polluted, capable somehow of imparting solely *disreputable* things: "We had to tell you a load of old shit so you'd believe us, you greedy

on their faces dropping to all fours and falling on the man to whom they had promised the world and left standing mystified and shattered with nothing but a blunted medieval weapon with which to defend himself.

Steve stepped onto the pavement. He paused for a moment to look up at the window above the shop. He strained his ears above the unending roar of the traffic and thought, or maybe imagined, that he could hear Ray shouting and the sound of wet, exhilarated snarling. Steve shuddered.

He felt disorientated and shaken, and was already doubting what he had seen just before he'd started down the stairs, reframing it, coping with it, by rationalising it away on the old flashbacks when a dark blue Ford Escort pulled up at the kerb in front of him.

The passenger side window rolled down

between his fingers. "Fuck, Ray!" Dawlish said and stepped around the table, his huge hands raised.

Ray spun and brought the sword round in a high arc. Dawlish watched it coming but was too amazed to react. The flat part of the blade whacked into the side of his head and Dawlish went down as if his legs had been kicked from under him. Ray hefted the sword and took it in both hands. His expression was serene and Steve saw in that moment that Ray had almost surely gone insane. He stood over Gadd and said again, this time in an even, almost reasonable tone, "Kneel."

Gadd was trembling, his big, bland, doltish face a mask of confusion and shock, but he moved his backside to the edge of the sofa and slid onto the floor and knelt there looking up at Ray.

And as he did, two men entered the room.

It was Trev and Vince, the proprietors of the antique shop beneath the flat. They were both wearing their trademark purple sweaters, cream linen trousers and fawn loafers. They ignored Steve and went over to Ray. They arranged themselves on either side of him and looked down at the stone. Ray stood a good six inches taller than them both.

Trev appeared delighted. He clasped his hands together beneath his pelican chin and sighed.

fucking moron." And he laughed again and this time it was the sound of a murderer's bathwater taking chunks of meat down an already clogged and rusty drain hole.

There was a sharp crack, like a pane of glass fracturing, and Steve felt suddenly sick with fear.

He was in the doorway and hadn't heard Plummer come back up. Steve assumed he had left at the same time he had let these two creatures in off the street. Steve decided it would be a very good idea to join him and began to creep away down the stairs.

He reached the door and managed to open it, but the descent had been in the sludge of a nightmare, and the skin had almost been crawling off his back with cold, petrified gooseflesh, and his eyes were wide and his jaw was clenched as if wired, because what Steve had seen at the last moment, as he started down towards the street, was enough to drive the sense from anyone sane.

Those men, that Trev and Vince, shopkeepers, vague acquaintances of Ray's for the last six years, a couple of innocuous but slightly shadowy fairies, were starting to alter. Ray had looked up and for a second caught Steve's eye, and his expression had been a horrible combination of cruelly dawning insight and incalculable fury.

Then Steve was gone, slipping away with the image of those two *Tchaikovskys* with great and terrible jaws hanging monstrous

and Plummer leaned across and put his head out.

"Get in, Steve. Fast!"

Steve stepped up and opened the door. He took a last look up at the window above the shop and could make out movement, frantic and cartoon-like, in silhouette behind the sunlit glass. There was a clang as something hefty and metallic ricocheted against the radiator beneath the windowsill.

Steve climbed in.

As they pulled out into the traffic, Steve thought he saw the street door fly open. It might have been an accident of shadow and the movement of the car, but Steve said, "Stop!"

Plummer continued to accelerate up the Islington Road.

"Wait, Plummer!" Steve shouted, rounding on the driver. It had been no illusion; as they were speeding away, Steve saw Jason Spicer stagger out from under the porch and collapse on the pavement, still clutching his face.

Plummer glanced at the rearview mirror. His expression was impassive, highly concentrated. "Fuck them," he said mildly.

Steve reached into his jacket pocket. He was not surprised to discover his hand was shaking. He pulled out a packet of Bensen's and lit up, holding his lighter steady in both hands. He exhaled smoke and sat back in the seat. He closed his eyes.

"What do you mean, 'fuck them,' Plummer? They're our friends."

Plummer's eyes remained fixed on the road. "They're not my friends," he said. "And they're not yours."

"What?"

"Never have been," Plummer said.

They drove past the Angel tube station and turned left onto City Road.

Steve kept his eyes on the road. Through clenched teeth, he said, "They're the only friends I've ever had."

Plummer laughed. "I'm the only friend you've ever had, Steve. Give me a smoke."

Steve tossed the packet of Bensons into Plummer's lap. Plummer scooped it up and put the box to his mouth, pulled out a cigarette in his teeth.

"Light?"

Steve handed Plummer his lighter.

"Thanks." Plummer lit up and blew smoke through his nose.

They drove in silence through the heavy traffic. "You shouldn't be afraid of your friends," Plummer said eventually.

Steve shrugged. "What do you mean?"

"You were afraid to tell Ray that Claire was pregnant. You were afraid to tell him you wanted to stop working for him."

Steve felt his heart sink, felt oddly embarrassed as if caught lying with no decent excuse for it. But he had good reason. Good reason to be afraid.

"Okay," he said. "How the hell do you know that?"

Plummer glanced across at his passenger. He smiled. Steve was startled by the unexpected gentleness in that smile, a depth of feeling he had never before seen on this strange, hard man's face. To Steve it looked as though Plummer had suddenly conceptualised the notion of grace and undergone some sort of astonishing conversion.

"I know so many things, Steve," Plummer said, and the gentleness was there in his voice, too. "I'll tell you what I can."

"Where are we going?" Steve asked.

Plummer returned his attention to the road.

"We're going to get Claire," he said. His fists were gripping the steering wheel tightly; his knuckles were white, Steve noticed. It was the first sign of tension Plummer had betrayed.

"Claire?" he said. "Why?"

Plummer grunted and stepped on the brakes as a bus pulled out in front of them.

"Because she's in danger, Steve," he said and swung the Escort into the oncoming traffic. A horn blared and Plummer cursed.

He cut back into the eastbound lane, left the bus chugging in his wake.

Then he was standing on the brakes again, this time stopping the car completely as the traffic ahead ground to a halt. "Fuck it!" he said.

Steve looked up and saw the snarl up. And saw what had caused it.

He turned to stare at Plummer with a fierce and unknowable terror rising in his chest. Fear for Claire and fear for the baby. But also a sudden and unruly fear for his sanity that was undeniably real and unfeasible to put down to anything so pedestrian as a *flashback*. This time there were no excuses.

Why? he had asked. And now that seemed rhetorical, because something so alien and disquieting had materialized, straddling the road ahead and plunging immense iron legs through the roofs of buildings and crushing the vehicles fateful

There was a cyclopean structure spanning the road, a pylon of immense size, bolted and plated with battleship sized flanks of metal

enough to be beneath them, that he was filled with a sense of approaching threat that exercised an almost gravitational compulsion on him.

Plummer craned his neck and looked up through the windscreen. Steve leaned forward and followed his gaze.

There was a cyclopean structure spanning the road, a pylon of immense size, bolted and plated with battleship sized flanks of metal. It reached up and up, tapering away into the low London afternoon sunlight.

Plummer sat back in his seat and frowned, as if calculating their next move. He put the Escort in first and edged forward.

He spoke then, steering the car out of the jam and edging it across the oncoming lane. They pulled out and slipped down a side street that remained partially negotiable and pulled away. It made little sense to Steve, but it was enough to fill him with an incomprehensible dread made somehow worse by the fact that his companion seemed both calm in the face of it and singularly aware of its intention.

"What did you say?" Steve asked.

"The Autoscofes are coming," said Plummer.

.....
"What the hell is that thing?"

Plummer steered the Escort with skill through the dense traffic.

"It's an Ingress Gantry," he said. "Or I-Gantry, if you want to sound cool. I don't give much of a fuck either way myself."

Steve was half-turned in his seat, looking back through the rear window. He could see the massive structure towering over London and was witnessing the effect it was having on the city's people. Traffic was grinding to a standstill. Vehicles were pulling over, the drivers climbing out to stand craning their necks to peer up at the Gantry. Some were talking into mobile phones or holding them up to take photos; others were engaging with each other, pointing, and looking more disbelieving than alarmed. Steve could hear the mounting intrusion of sirens. A group of young men raced past the Escort, shouting, and headed away towards the Gantry.

Steve was about to say something, but Plummer's mobile phone went off. Plummer hooked it out of his jacket pocket

and said, "Yeah?"

Plummer made some acknowledging grunts and a minute later hung up. They came up to an intersection and Plummer braked. He looked out of the driver side window. "There it is," he said.

"What?" asked Steve, and ducked his head to follow Plummer's gaze. "Oh, shit," he said.

"The Mile End Gantry," Plummer said. "They're appearing faster than we predicted. That's a problem. We have to get Claire and leave London before it seizes up completely."

Steve rubbed his eyes. He took out his Bensons, lit one for himself and one for Plummer. "Here," he said.

"Thanks." Plummer took the cigarette and plugged it into the corner of his mouth.

"So, tell me about this problem, Plummer," Steve said. "Please."

Plummer nodded, but Steve wasn't expecting any of it, especially when Plummer started talking about God.

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"There are two realities, Steve, the material world and the unconscious world. God upholds the material by his Word; we uphold the unconscious with our dreams. Only the unconscious is infinite."

Steve shook his head, blew smoke out of the window. "Right," he said.

Plummer went on. "It's our practise ground; it's where we work miracles now

that we've lost confidence in our waking reality. It's where we walk on water, where we fly. When Man fell, God gave us the Unconscious as a reminder that we were once gods ourselves so that when the time came for the re-creation of the material world some of us would be ready and remember our destiny."

Plummer drove them out onto the A13, where traffic was still moving. Steve could see the Mile End Gantry in the distance to their right. He frowned, and tried to focus on what Plummer was saying.

"With the Fall of Man came entropy, disease and death. God created a race of beings called Firmament Surgeons, engineers of Creation, to hold back the decay. But they saw what Man was capable of and used their own free will to choose obedience or rebellion; many fell. They became Autoscoptes and sought to hasten the destruction of creation. Cigarette?"

they are so powerful now. We've fought them for nearly four thousand years and we've held them back, but it's time for us to face them for the final time. We have to save your child and get her to a safe place or it will have been for nothing."

"Are you a *Firmament Surgeon*?" Steve asked.

Plummer laughed. "Nah," he said.

Steve sat back in his chair. He suddenly felt conned. This was a fucking joke.

"Plummer –"

"I'm a Paladin," Plummer said.

"A –"

"A Paladin. The Firmament Surgeons are supernatural beings but they've used men like me throughout history to do their work on the ground, to orchestrate and keep a weather eye out. I was never there for Ray. I was sent to the Unit to make sure certain things happened, to ensure your destiny unfolded along the right lines. This is the

"Another place of safety, but this is sustained by the unconscious of one of the children. A little girl called Lesley."

"Fucking hell," Steve said, "my head hurts."

Plummer laughed, and his phone rang again.

Two more Gantries had materialised, one in Southwark, the other at Blackheath. But this time Plummer stayed on the phone. His expression darkened and he swore.

"Okay," he said and pocketed the phone.

He turned to Steve, and Steve discovered that his brief and comforting calm was a fragile misapprehension.

"They're opening," Plummer said, and for the first time, for a terrible, bleak instant, there was fear in that man's eyes, like a flicker of lightning on the horizon of a dark, flat sea. "Dear God, not yet."

"Uh, yeah," Steve said and handed Plummer another smoke. He felt as though the interior of the car had become something terrifying, a racing cubicle filled with smoke and bad light, a trap in which he was to receive some kind of appalling revelation that would drive him mad. He was a smart guy, a sceptic and until now had considered himself to be a reluctant agnostic, but he had never expected God to stick his head in and start roaring out of Plummer's mouth. "Plummer, is this bullshit?"

Plummer shook his head and glanced over at Steve. "Of course not," he said. "In a while there's going to be Gantries all over London and they're going to open and things are going to come out. Terrible things. And they're going to be searching for us. For you and Claire. Mainly Claire."

Steve shut his eyes and put his hands to his temples. "Because of the baby?"

"Yes," said Plummer. "The child Claire is carrying is a reborn Firmament Surgeon. And we think she's one of the children who can bring about the re-creation."

"We? Who's we, for fucks sake?"

"The good guys," Plummer smiled and Steve saw that incongruous tenderness beatify his expression once more. He felt a sudden inrush of calm, and it was welcome.

"There have been so many battles," he said. "We've lost so many to the Autoscoptes, to the devil-in-dreams, and

culmination of *history* we're talking about!"

"But Ray had all the ideas," Steve said.

"Who put them in his head?" asked Plummer, and winked. "Listen, the Autoscoptes use bad men, psychopaths, shitheads to do their dirty work. The *Toyceivers*. Trev and Vince thought they were controlling things when they gave Ray the sword and told him about the Stone. But it was me that introduced them, me that gave Ray the historical spin I knew would appeal to his conceits. It was what I left out that mattered."

Plummer's phone rang, and Steve jumped, heart hammering. As Plummer lifted it to his ear, Steve looked out of the window and said, "Don't tell me."

Two more Gantries had appeared.

"Cheapside and Whitechapel," Plummer said. "Yeah, we're nearly there." He hung up.

"Who are you talking to?" Steve asked.

"Jon Index," Plummer said. "A real live Firmament Surgeon. He's at a safe house in Dartford keeping three very powerful children from harm."

"Are we taking Claire there?"

"Not wise. We need to get out of London. Once we have Claire, Index and his Paladin will meet us and we'll travel together with the children. Somehow we're going to have to open an Egress Gantry and get away."

"Where to?"

"One of the Quays," Plummer said.

Steve craned his neck as a formation of fighter jets tore overhead. They were low and fuming, aiming towards the Islington Gantry with howling combatant purpose. Steve watched as they banked then disappeared into the distance.

"Back-up," he said.

"They'll be no fucking use," said Plummer.

"Oh," said Steve. "That's a shame."

4 Claire was watching the news, her hands linked over her belly. Reporters were talking about some kind of phenomena appearing all over London; cameras showed footage of the immense pylons and the build up of army vehicles and troops which were congregating around them. There was a cut away as a jet fighter roared past and another showing an American reconnaissance AWAX plane circling in the distance, its sinister radar slowly revolving.

Claire stood up and went over to the window. She pulled the net curtain aside and peered out. From the tenth floor of the flats she could just make out the slender, tapering frame of what must be the Mile End Pylon stretching up into the cloud base.

She shuddered and let the curtain fall back. She went to the sofa and paused, feeling restless. She thought about going next door to see if Maureen was catching

this. Claire thought that everybody within reach of a TV would be glued to their screens, awestruck and childlike with apprehension. She remembered how she had felt watching the Twin Towers collapse, a kind of watery trepidation, a wonderment that had nothing to do with delight and an excitement that had nothing to do with pleasure, yet it had been thrilling in a purely breathtaking way. She'd been sitting there on the sofa, she recalled, eating lunch as the planes hit. And it had been an immediate instinct to connect with someone and share the news that had led her to go and knock on Maureen's door. Maureen had answered, attired in housecoat and slippers and, a little wild-eyed, had virtually dragged Claire into her flat where they had stood watching the news on Maureen's little TV/video player combination portable, and Maureen had said, intoxicated by events, "It's amazing, Claire. Do you think there'll be any more?" Claire had realised that Maureen could probably contentedly watch planes crashing into tall buildings all day.

A rapid knocking on the front door startled her. Claire went down the hall and called, "Hang on." She stepped into the kitchen where her phone was charging. She picked it up off the worktop, switched it on and saw 1 MISSED CALL displayed on the screen. Claire remembered the reporters saying that the first pylon had appeared in Islington and she reckoned that Steve was probably trying to get hold of her to tell her he was okay. She unplugged the charger and carried the phone out into the hall, thumbing the dial button as she went. There was another barrage of knocking. Claire looked through the spy hole above the letterbox and could see the distorted figure of Maureen standing in the passage. She undid the latch and opened the door.

"Come in, Maur," Claire said, and stepped aside.

She looked up from the phone just as a long, serrated blade slid into Maureen's temple, went all the way through her head and emerged from her left ear in a red and greyish jet. There was a moment, as Claire staggered back down the hall, dropping her phone and tripping on the nap of the worn kilim runner, when Maureen's pupils glittered with a bright, reflective silver lustre, like fish scales floating on the surface of her eyes, and Claire had time to understand that it was light reflecting off the blade that had passed through her sinuses and divided her eyeballs. And then she felt herself falling backwards, falling,

just as Maureen was collapsing, brimming with news and suddenly just too dead to impart it.

The hand holding the knife tensed and wrenched the blade free. Maureen's head was tipped against her left shoulder as the blade tore against her skull and for a moment she looked too animated, too terribly quizzical to be dead, but then the blade was out and she fell on her face in the doorway, small slippered feet plumping soundlessly on the tiles as she twitched.

Then the killer stepped over her body and came into the flat. Claire looked up, numb with fear and shock, and saw the man walking towards her. He was a very strange looking killer. He was average height and stocky with a round, cheerful face and short, cropped grey hair. He wore slacks and a purple pullover. He smiled and Claire saw that he was carrying a blade in both of his fat, pale hands.

He had been the Ripper once, and had walked Whitechapel in search of the pregnant whore carrying the child

"Hello, Mary," he said, and at last, Claire screamed.

Claire tried to get up off the floor, but the man was standing over her and had a foot either side of her hips. "For God's sake," Claire gasped, "I'm pregnant."

The man smiled again, an engaging kind of look similar to the expression one might see on the face of a man suddenly remembering a happy event from the past, something to give him a warm glow. "Oh, I know," he said, and held the blades out above Claire's stomach.

Instinctively, Claire curled up and rolled onto her side. She caught the man off balance and he stumbled. Claire tried to push herself away, but as she thrust out her legs the man fell onto her and she felt something slide into her, a coldness so wrong and loathsome and sharp that she bit her lip and felt her eyes roll up into her head. She said, "Uhh," and tried to push the man away but there was no strength left in her. Somewhere in the distance she could hear conversation and realised it was the TV. Despite her pain she heard the raised voice of a reporter remarking on the fact that something was happening, some new development. There were lights. Strange, dazzling rills of light crawling over the brackets and bolted stanchions of the Islington Pylon.

Claire turned her head and the face of

her assailant was an inch away, the same enigmatic smile playing about his lips. The blade, which had entered beneath her ribs and punctured her lung, had been meant for her baby. Claire experienced a rush of fury and lifted her head off the floor, butting the man on the bridge of his nose.

There was a splintering crunch and the man roared. He threw himself away, leaving the knife still protruding from Claire's side. Kneeling, goateed with blood, he glared at Claire and raised the other blade. "I'm going to cut that pup out of you and peel it alive while it's still dangling from the cord," he said and staggered to his feet.

Claire groaned and pushed herself up on her elbows.

The man stepped towards her.

Claire looked down at the knife and the blood that was soaking through her shirt. She felt tears welling in the corners of her eyes. And then something moved in

her belly. A kick. It was the first physical indication of movement she had felt from the child, and she thought, oh, *baby*, and then she was no longer lying on the floor in the hall of her flat, no longer suffering the brutal agony of a stab wound and punctured lung. She was somewhere else, and was watching

a child standing beneath the overhanging branches of the willows that grew around the bank of a peculiar eye-shaped pool. A flat-bottomed punt was moored to a trunk and threads of shadow slid like ripples across its sand-coloured planks. There was a picnic hamper sitting on a chequered cloth on the near bank. The child knelt and started unpacking the hamper. She sang to herself as she placed the cakes and bottles of drink on the cloth. She was a very beautiful child, with delicate hands and an unselfish, gentle face. She dipped her hands into the hamper and lifted out a large, heavy-looking cogwheel. She held it up and put her eye to the threaded hole bored through its middle. It had large, angular teeth and looked like a slice of hard, brass sun. The child placed the cog on the cloth and smiled. She wiped her oily hands on the grass and sat back on her haunches.

There was movement in the trees behind her, and as she turned, someone came into the clearing.

The man stopped for a moment as

she looked at him and appeared to be attempting to work out the meaning of her expression. The child looked surprised to see him, but curiously off-guard as though she had been expecting someone else.

He crossed the clearing smiling, because her expression had suddenly changed into something altogether more gratifying.

She had seen what he was carrying.

Panting, he reached her. He snatched her up by the front of her dress and lifted her by one hand. He trod through the cakes she had laid out, smearing them beneath his shoes. He laughed thunderously into her pale, terrified face, break-neck eyes shot through with unseemly light.

He had come through centuries for this moment.

He had been the Ripper once, and had walked Whitechapel in search of the pregnant whore carrying the child. He had killed Mary Kelly and cut the re-born

up against the teenage boy was a little blonde girl of about seven.

When Steve saw the face of the man in the front, he stopped. He experienced a moment of disorientation and then realised with a jolt where he had seen him before. The man turned and looked at Steve and Steve knew for sure. He remembered perusing Ray's DVD collection in the bedroom of Ray's Islington apartment. Most of them Ray had got from his own pirating operations and there were very few that had come with a receipt and guarantee. Steve had pulled one out. Mick Reeks' Perrier Award winning stand up show, *Cats Cause Cancer*. Steve had heard of this guy, had seen some of his stuff and enjoyed it in fact, but was surprised it was to Ray's taste. Reeks was mordant and bleak, surreal and uncompromising. Ray was more a *Jackass* kind of guy.

Ray had come over. "That bloke does me

kind of understanding.

"Jon," said Plummer. "We have to get her out of here."

Index nodded. He looked worn. "The child is incredible," he said. "Somehow she managed to open a Quay and take me in. It was feculent. I've been after that bastard for a long time." He shook his head. "Incredible power. Not even re-born yet and she can do this."

There was the sound of a car door opening and Mick Reeks said, "Guys, if we're going, we'd better do it sooner than later. Look over there."

The men looked west, towards the Mile End Gantry, and saw what was coming.

Something had detached itself from the Gantry. There was a pillar of light contained within the frame of the structure, like a vast silver filament. Dark specks were dropping from the stanchions and descending on the city. Something

pup out of her while she rolled her eyes in the appalling moment of her death. Now this! His masters were generous with their opportunities, that couldn't be denied.

With his free hand he lifted the serrated blade before her.

She made no sound. The blade gleamed, chopped the air.

He took a moment to look around before rendering her carrion, and had that moment to see the great creature come thundering out of the trees towards him. He had a single moment to see it in its full beauty, before its tusks bore into him and threw him from the child.

Bleeding, trembling, he rose, blade gone, and saw the creature bulking over the girl.

Tusks gory, it faced him again, and bellowing, rushed him.

Glorifying once more into something of light and terrible pressure, this time it rent him in half.

Plummer and Steve pulled up outside the flats and got out of the Escort. There was a big red four-wheel drive Frontera at the curb in front of the entrance. There was a man sitting in the passenger seat and a teenage boy in the back. As they walked past, Steve glanced in and saw another two children asleep on the back seat. A young boy of about three was cuddling a worn-looking soft toy. Steve thought it looked like a llama. Cute. Beside him and curled

up!" he'd said. "Does me *right up*!"

"You think he's funny?" Steve had asked. There was a photo of Reeks on the back of the box, on stage with a radio mike and a cigarette. Short, curly haired, restless-looking.

"He does this bit about pandas in Norfolk, Steve. Fucking *pandas*. Never laughed so much in my life."

Steve shrugged. Pandas didn't strike him as particularly side-splitting.

Ray had taken the box from Steve and held it up, gazing at the picture on the back. "Strange what happened to him."

Steve had raised his eyebrows. "What?" "Disappeared last year. Just like that. *Pffft*."

And now Steve was standing outside Claire's flat looking in on Mick Reeks and Reeks was smiling.

"Oh, fuck," said Plummer.

Steve turned, and saw that what remained of his world had fallen apart.

A man was coming out of the entrance to the flats carrying his girl. Steve ran over and helped him place Claire on the grass verge by the pavement. She was pale and covered in blood.

"She's alive," the man said, kneeling by her side.

"What happened?" Steve asked. He was crying, and looked up as Plummer walked over, searching his expression for some

was staying in the air, though, and making progress towards them. It was still too distant for Steve to make out what it was, but he heard Plummer hiss, "You, too, you bitch? You're *mine*." Steve looked up and saw Plummer step away from the group and walk slowly across the road, never taking his eyes away from the dipping, swaying thing flying towards them. He pulled something from his jacket.

And then a low-slung and elegantly wasted grey Saab 900 convertible screamed around the corner of the flats and drove straight at him.

Plummer threw himself out of the way. The Saab braked, mounted the kerb and stopped. The driver side door flew open and Ray Cade stepped out. He was carrying what remained of the sword in his left hand. The blade had snapped, leaving about a foot of jagged, rusty metal protruding from the handle. He came around the back of the car and walked towards Plummer.

"You *cunts*," he said. Ray was dishevelled and bloody. He had a deep gash running across the bridge of his nose and it looked like something had bitten his left cheek. His hair was sticking up at the back in a spiny dovetail and his suit was ripped, filthy and covered in thick shining patches of what appeared to be saliva or some sort of mucus.

Plummer faced Ray. He pointed the gun he had taken from his jacket at Ray's head.

Ray stopped advancing and stood glaring at Plummer. "You wouldn't fucking dare!" he hissed. "After everything I've done for you."

Plummer remained impassive. He had assumed his true role now and there was nothing about Ray that could elicit any sense of subordination. "Get back in the car and drive away," Plummer said.

Ray was quaking with rage.

As Ray and Plummer stood in the road, Steve felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up and saw Index standing over him. "Look after Claire," he said and walked over to Plummer.

"I'm supposed to be the Lord of London," Ray said in a tone that was both truculent and grossly disenchanted.

Index said, "You've fulfilled your destiny, Ray. Now you're finished. Get out of here or you'll die by the side of the road."

Ray blinked, stared at Index. "Who the fuck are you?"

"The stone was the Great Instrument, Ray. You used your ancestor's sword to operate it. It allows all the Gantries to be opened."

"Jack Cade didn't open any Gantries," Ray said.

"He failed, Ray. He wasn't careless of the feelings of others enough to be used by the Autosscopes. And the time wasn't right for the children to be born and brought together. We have all four now and the prophecy can be fulfilled. Get out of here, Ray. You've been used. Don't die for it like Jack Cade."

Steve was startled by what he heard. He suddenly remembered the train journey to Brighton six years ago at the start of all this. He recalled the woman in the carriage transfixed for a moment in slow twilight dapples, arms raised at her sides, saying *'When the Great Instrument is found, the Long Man will come down from the hills.'*

And as he remembered this, he heard something else. It was the low chugging of a small motor, a distant chopping, puttering sound, and he squinted and saw how close the thing in the air was. It was quite clearly a person riding some kind of outlandish flying machine. It was about three hundred feet up and less than a quarter of a mile away.

While Index was engaging Ray, Plummer stepped aside and walked over to Steve. The gun remained at his hip, pointing at Ray. Ray glowered, but the fight seemed to have gone out of him; the remnant of the sword hung from his fingers, the shards of the curtailed blade dangling a foot above

the asphalt.

"How is she?" Plummer asked.

"I don't know," Steve said. "She's breathing. She's unconscious. She's stuck with a fucking carving knife, man. What are we going to do?"

And then Steve was startled as the little dark-haired boy, carrying his worn stuffed toy, came between him and Plummer and placed a hand on Claire's belly. Steve looked up and saw the Frontera's rear door open, with Reeks standing still holding the handle. Inside, Steve could see the teenage boy sitting with his head lowered and his lips moving. He looked like he was praying, or chanting something. The little girl was still curled up with her head on his lap, but now she seemed to be breathing more quickly, as if having a nightmare. The little boy, who must only have been about four, looked up at Steve and smiled. It was a beautiful grin, full of reassuring and unspoilt hope, and his soft brown eyes shone with infectious optimism. Steve's eyes were tired and teary, but he managed a grin back. "Hey," he said. "You okay?"

"Okay," the boy said. "Chloe looks like you. Blue eyes." Then he knelt down by Claire's side and closed his eyes, hand still placed on her belly.

Steve looked up at Plummer with a puzzled expression, but Plummer nodded and returned his attention to the flying creature that was nearly upon them. "Nurse Melt," he said. "On her Uproar Contraption. She wants Lesley, but she's not having her." He raised the gun and fired.

The machine, a misshapen frame of junkyard parts, lurched and wheeled away, taking it and its operator on a trajectory over the roof of the flats. Steve could hear the engine clattering as it came around again. He looked down. The little boy was talking, but Steve couldn't hear what he was saying. In the car, Lesley was thrashing and the older boy was holding her, soothing her, as he prayed.

Mick came over. "They're working together," he said. His eyes were wide and he seemed awestruck. "This is wonderful."

Steve stroked Claire's brow. Her eyes were moving beneath their lids; she was dreaming.

He flinched as Plummer fired again. Steve looked up and saw the flying machine come around and aim for them. He saw the crazed thing in its saddle, a huge, pale woman with a tattered flag of orange hair flying out behind her like a child's depiction of a rocket's flame. He heard her screech, and as she took the

bullet high in the pallid meat of her right thigh, Steve saw that her face was ripped, her lips flapping like rinds.

She screeched again and twisted the cow horn handlebars of her ride. The Uproar Contraption tore away, engine wailing, the huge, filthy sheets of the wings thrumming and rippling. It flew back towards the Mile End Gantry and as Steve watched, he could make out the shapes of things coming to meet it.

There were more airborne silhouettes, and things that leaped from building to building. There was something tall and thin, nodding like a vast, black stick of burnt cartilage. And something pressed between the buildings, a monstrous slab, extruding tentacles with the supple reflex of a snail's eyes. What came in its wake, or led on with roars and merciless deeds at street level was unknowable, but Steve had seen enough to know that they were all dead in less than about fifteen minutes.

Plummer was standing next to Index. Ray was gone.

Steve stood up, left Mick standing over Claire and the boy, and went over to them. "Where's Ray?" he asked.

"We let him go," Index said. "Five hundred years ago your ancestor, Alexander Iden, followed Jack Cade to Heathfield near the South coast and killed him. You've got a choice. You can try and follow Ray, chase him down and kill him. Or you can leave him and come with us."

"Why would I want to kill him?" Steve asked. Until this morning, despite the fear he had felt, Steve had always loved Ray.

"It's your destiny," Index said. "Now or later."

Steve shook his head. "No way," he said. "Let him go."

Plummer nodded. "Then let's get out of here," he said.

.....
The four men stood together – Steve, Index, Plummer and Reeks – and watched the children work. Alex, the dark-haired boy, Lesley – dreaming a fractal dream of her complex terrain – and Robin, in congress with the unborn one, their Chloe, fulfilling the prophecy, bringing the Long Man down from the hill.

.....
There was a change in the air, the atmospheric precursor to an electric storm. Steve squinted as the rising wind blew grit across the car park. He felt the hairs on his arms furring up. He watched as a line of light appeared in the air ten feet away, widened to become a narrow,

golden doorway, and allowed ingress to the largest man Steve had ever seen. The light faded, but Steve was sure he caught the impression of a second figure, a smaller man, remaining inside the Gantry, and behind him a place of staggering magnitude populated by rank upon rank of vast, complicated brass machinery, like the very clockworks that wound up to power the sun.

The Gantry closed, and the man stood before them. In each hand he held a metal rod equipped at their tops with a lever of some sort. Steve looked into his face, the great, bearded, suffering-eyed, face, and felt a wave of compassion almost drown him.

Plummer stepped forward. No small man himself, Plummer had to look up to make eye contact. Then he embraced him.

"I thought you were lost," Plummer said. "Old friend."

The man closed his eyes, nodded. *I was*, his expression said. *For so long*.

Index carried Claire. Mick had Lesley, sleeping still, in his arms and Alex stood between Steve and Robin, holding their hands. The llama was tucked beneath his right armpit.

The Long Man, as Steve thought of him, was standing by the verge. He held one of his levers out over the grass. Plummer said something to him and the man plunged the lever into the ground. He squeezed the mechanism at the top and almost instantly a Gantry opened behind him.

"Come on," said Index and they walked up to it. Without looking back, Index carried Claire through and Mick followed. Robin paused. Alex looked up at him, then at Steve. "Go on," Steve said.

Robin frowned, but entered the Gantry with Alex.

Steve turned to Plummer.

"What are you going to do?"

Plummer looked at the giant. "We'll stay." He turned and pointed towards the Mile End Gantry and the monsters that swarmed from it. "We have things to take care of."

Steve looked at the ground, closed his eyes. He was thinking about Ray. He said, "You want me to stay?"

"No," Plummer said. "Claire needs you and so does the baby. You go now. Take care, Steve."

Steve put out a hand. Plummer took it and they shook.

Then Steve turned and he went through. ■

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THE STAR NECROMANCERS

story **Alexander Marsh Freed**  **Jim Burns** image

We await the necromancers in the palace of the Gloriarch, whispering to one another as jealous eyes watch from dataspace and mnemetic pollens cloud the air. We wear our most ornate avatars, crafted for the occasion out of flesh and metal and realspace holograms. And we watch the archways, anticipating the climax of the season.

We saw the speck in the heavens months before its arrival, a distant sphere come to intersect our own. We designed the season accordingly: The Weatherman kept the skies clear, dimmed the output of the moons, and purified the atmosphere between auroras. The Architect wove spired silver cities for our homes and planted fountains that lured our eyes upward. For my part, I built dark-petaled fronds set with glowing blue blossoms and seeded lagoons and swamps with sparkling bacteria.

The planet became a sea of stars, and our civilization became a mountain stretching toward unknown gods. Predictions and refutations regarding the visitors dominated the fora, while the ascetics told stories of ancestral worlds and human destiny. It was the Gloriarch who spoke to the visitors at the edge of the system and learned that they called themselves necromancers. It was she who convinced them to come to the planet and show

themselves to us.

She approaches me now in a body of ivory skin wrapped in floating lattices of golden particles. I recognize genemods of my own design in the minute flecks of skin that float off her into the air, and know that she can smell the electricity in my brain. I try to ease my thoughts as she speaks.

"Gardener, I'm so pleased with your work today. Thank you for decorating my party." Her voice is warm and caring, as if we've been close for ages.

"I'm looking forward to meeting the necromancers," I admit, "even if I should be readying the soil for next season..."

That morning, when the Gloriarch invited me to participate, my attention was split among a hundred automata razing the forests of the Western Archipelago. I wonder at their progress now, but resist the urge to slip my mind into laser knives and metallic tendrils. Their work is important, but hardly delicate; they can proceed on their own.

"Don't worry about that," the Gloriarch says, her focus drifting now that she's fulfilled her obligation to thank me. "I'll be making an announcement tonight, and you'll have to change your plans anyway."

This perturbs me. My own sphere of influence is one of many enveloped by the Gloriarch's, but I bristle at anyone interfering with the making of seasons. "What's the announcement?" I ask.

The Gloriarch shrugs, then smiles with mischievous delight. "They are going to make our glory eternal, Gardener," she says. "The rest, you'll learn soon enough."

The Gloriarch departs, and I distract myself with the party's delights as I wait for the necromancers. At last, they appear – without preamble, without noise. There are five of them, dressed in black encounter suits that sparkle and burst with light as they absorb and expel the room's illumination. The necromancers' faces are hidden, and their masks are identical; I can differentiate them only by their movements and their physiques. Chatter in the fora increases exponentially as they move to acknowledge our hostess.

Once formal greetings have been exchanged, four of the necromancers explore their surroundings while the last remains with the Gloriarch. Highlights of their conversations are broadcast as they mingle with the guests, and I listen curiously as they describe their journey. They are travelers, each from a different world, students of a secret science only necromancers know. They sleep during flights between dead stars, awakening to study stellar corpses and perform their strange rituals. They are pleased by their welcome to our world, they say, but find our ways alien.

I smile, and mentally compare them to the ascetics. Both cut themselves



off from civilization in pursuit of superstitious beliefs. Both, no doubt, are as overwhelmed by us as we are mystified by them.

I think the Gloriarch has come to the same conclusion, because I notice her speaking to each necromancer in turn, drawing them to quiet corners of the palace. She's ensuring their comfort, but she's also manipulating them – rescuing them from the fray to improve their opinion of her. It's her way.

I've filled one of the pools with single-celled symbiotes that bond to bathers' nerve endings. I'm reducing the symbiotes' division rate when one of the necromancers approaches me. This one moves with confidence and certainty. His voice is the suit's, deep and watery.

"This world's ecology is your creation?" he asks.

I bow my head. "I am the Gardener," I say. "Most of the season's designs are mine, but they're based on the achievements of my predecessors."

The necromancer pauses thoughtfully. "Nonetheless, it is a very rich ecosystem for a sunless world. You have my compliments."

I thank him, and we briefly discuss the difficulties of working under the artificial light of the moons. I'm surprised to find that he comprehends my duties as well as the average civilized person. When the conversation turns back to the party, I note, "If you'd alerted us beforehand, we could've provided you with avatars for your visit."

"It would not have helped," the necromancer says. "We do not use avatars."

I'm genuinely surprised. "These are your original bodies?" I ask.

"Not by choice," the necromancer replies. "Carrying an archive aboard the ship would be impractical."

I stare at the necromancer, trying to read some emotion or nuance in the dead gaze of the mask, or find some hint of his mood in the air. I find nothing. "We could have created an atmosphere to your comfort, then," I suggest. "We have –"

He cuts me off. "The suits are not for atmosphere. We avoid the taint of unfiltered light."

I want to laugh as I realize that the necromancer is trying to show tact to heretics. "Tell me more," I say, wondering if he will.

The necromancer is still for a few seconds, then bows his head. "Another time," he says. "I believe your Gloriarch is preparing an announcement."

I can't discern how he knows this, but as it turns out, he's right; the Gloriarch's icon soon dominates dataspace, and her avatar stands on the surface of a pool of reflective silver. To her side is the necromancer with whom she's spent much of the evening; this one I think of as young and female. I base this on nothing consciously noted.

"My dear friends," the Gloriarch says, and her voice echoes in dataspace and the palace. "The arrival of our visitors presents a wondrous opportunity, and I am proud to welcome them to our world."

We fall still, and laughter and cries from the palace's back rooms fill the silence.

"I have spoken with the necromancers about their desires, their needs and their hopes," she continues. "I have come to the conclusion that our spheres are aligned, and that they can help us ensure our future."

"In the weeks to come, the necromancers will perform an astonishing task – one that

anything until we know what is to happen.

"The necromancers are going to reignite our sun," we're told, but that's the extent of the specifics. I query the Gloriarch a dozen times: how will this happen? How much energy will the new sun release? What will be its color, its texture, its taste? I must know these things for my work.

When I do receive a reply, it doesn't come from the Gloriarch. It's an invitation from the necromancers to see their stellar apparatus.

I accept instantly, with guarded enthusiasm.

I send an avatar to ride an equipment transport up to the necromancers' ship. This is my first journey off-world, and my avatar is overdesigned for zero-gravity movement and low-oxygen environments. I adjust my stomach contents to eliminate nausea as the shell of the transport rattles and screams, but soon find myself floating

All stars have names, he says, but it's only after a star dies that one can safely peer inside it and learn its true nature

will carry our legacy for a billion years. They have my full support, and I hope that you will offer your cooperation.

"The necromancers are going to reignite our sun."

"The coming season will be eternal."

The fora flood with words. The partygoers cheer and shriek and wail. The Gloriarch continues, but few of us are listening.

I wonder what this means for my garden.

During the weeks that follow, the necromancers travel between our world and our sun, transporting gigantic devices they manufacture from our resources and from their mysterious templates. I spend the days in my sanctum, trying to design an ecology that can survive under a star's light. The challenge should be enjoyable; this is what the Gloriarch tells me when I try to talk to her about her decision. But it's one thing to have outside events inspire a work; it's another when those events define what must be done.

My occasional visits to the Weatherman and the Architect are met with similar reactions – or they would be, if I were allowed to speak with them directly. But their golems, dull and repetitive as they are, convey their moods clearly enough. My peers will consult with each other and with me only once they've solved their own problems. And none of us will solve

anxiously before a metal hatch.

After almost an hour, it screeches open. Behind it hovers the necromancer I met at the party, casually gripping a handrail. "Come in," he says. "It will be a while before we reach the solar pylons."

He leads me inside, and I'm startled by the ship's blackness. No radiation penetrates the hull, and no windows look upon the stars. The local dataspace signals are encrypted, leaving the bleak metal hallways empty of icons and overlays – at least to my eyes. What I'm allowed to see of the interior is little more than a series of tunnels, handrails and hatches. I do not know how the necromancers can live in such a state.

"When we last spoke, you asked about the purpose of our suits," the necromancer says, as if the conversation in question had been only minutes before. "We believe that a sun's light is a profoundly powerful thing; it is the nature of that light that causes life to flourish or wither, and that defines the course of evolution. Each sun's light is different, determined by its name – a pattern we read in the sea of electrons at a sun's heart. By wearing the suits, we prevent infection by the light of foreign stars."

"Are you born wearing the suits, then?" I ask, and imagine fetuses floating in synthetic black wombs.

"No," the necromancer says.

"Necromancers are not designed; all of us here are converts, recruits from systems we – or others – have visited. You're right, of course, that we therefore carry the light of our birth-suns inside us – but this cannot be helped."

My guide opens a hatch, and we proceed into a small chamber that I presume is used for navigation; holograms of the system float around me, and my eyes search out the speck of my world – strangely similar to the speck of the necromancers' ship as I saw it months before.

"How often is someone converted?" I ask. "I'd imagine it's a difficult proposition."

The necromancer considers the question. "Our coterie numbers twelve members, and dozens of others travel the galaxy. Since my own conversion, I've seen six individuals join our cause. This seems frequent to me, but my timeframe is different than yours."

When we leave your system, we will travel two hundred light years to the Seven Colonies; there, we will learn what in their sun's light made their civilization prosper, and then take that with us to our next destination. Our knowledge will accrue as the universe passes us by."

I can't help but laugh, delighted by his enthusiasm and unnerved by not knowing how seriously to take him. I realize I'm tensed, trying to assess the man before me who swings so easily from charming to lunatic.

I relax as he asks about my own life. He asks how I came to be a Gardener, and I tell him about my five parents and the DNA they wove for me; how they placed me in dataspace playgrounds that taught genetic design; about my apprenticeship under the previous Gardener, and my eventual appointment by the Gloriarch. The necromancer, in turn, says that his

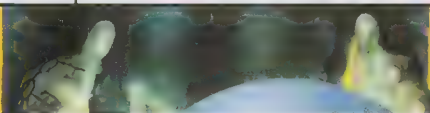
should be, and the Gloriarch is pleased." She hooks a foot adeptly on a handrail along the floor, stopping her momentum. "I should return to the ship."

"As you like," my guide says. He does not watch her as she slips down into the cylinder, instead proceeding to the pedestal. "Come," he repeats. "Look at this."

I do as he asks, and study the orb more closely. It is slightly larger than a human head, and has a reflective sheen similar to that of the necromancers' suits. I find nothing extraordinary about it, and say so.

"Yet it is the key to your sun's rebirth," the necromancer says. "The pylons are nothing without an understanding of the sun itself, and within this orb is a piece of your sun's soul."

I start to shake my head, but he continues. "Whenever we see a star fade, we lure its last light into orbit around an artificial singularity. This orb carries



I smile, letting him know that I recognize his evasive answer for what it is. Still, although I wonder at his sanity in the back of my mind, I find myself enjoying his company.

He tells me about the names of stars, and how the necromancers study them. All stars have names, he says, but it's only after a star dies that one can safely peer inside it and learn its true nature. To reignite a star, one must know its name first; otherwise, all attempts will ultimately fail.

This, at least, is what I understand. The necromancer often interjects arcane terminology and occult equations into his speech, and I suspect he does so knowing I can't grasp them. It is a way of keeping secrets, perhaps, or a test of my reactions.

Finally, I interrupt him. "And this is how you spend your lives? Sleeping for centuries, awakening only to briefly study a star, and then going to sleep again?"

"It is not the acts themselves which are fulfilling," he tells me. "It is the strides we make into the future. This month, we reignite your sun – but although our actions shall resonate until the death of your civilization, our work here is only an exercise between greater experiments. Before we arrived, we spent a year orbiting a dead star that broadcast its name in neutron bursts. The people of that system had destroyed themselves, but we were there to lay the spirit of their star to rest.

homeworld was peopled by ascetics, and that I am the first Gardener he has spoken with. I am strangely touched.

He gives me a screen on which to watch our approach to the solar pylons. The pylons are enormous, a dozen arcs of shining metal that orbit the dark sun like a shattered cage. We dock with one – no different from the others, so far as I can tell – and three necromancers order machines to unload equipment as we proceed inside. Unlike the ship, the pylon admits a portion of the cosmic radiation spectrum; I attune my eyes to view its brightness.

"Come," the necromancer says. "I want to show you something."

The pylon is more spacious than the ship, and I bounce from wall to wall as we rise through a great cylinder. On reaching the top, we slip through another hatch into a wide, domed chamber. The walls are either screens or windows – I can't tell – but it feels as if we're standing atop the world, with all the stars around us and a dead sun below.

In the front of the chamber is the young necromancer from the party. She sits cross-legged in the air before a pedestal, upon which rests a black orb. The necromancer turns to us quickly as we enter, as if startled.

"All is well?" my guide asks.

The other necromancer nods, and pushes off toward us. "The star is as it

your sun's dying breath, and it resonates in sympathy with its creator. We derive secrets from it; we configure the pylons based on those secrets.

"Our ship carries a hundred other orbs like it, for a hundred other stars. It is with them that we control the names of suns."

I almost believe him. I reach to dataspace out of habit, searching for corroborative research, but the lunar transmitters don't broadcast this far from the planet. So I fall back on instinct.

"This is madness," I say.

The necromancer replies easily. "It is truth. And when all the universe falls dark, it will be the only thing that saves us from oblivion. It is only through our knowledge that the stars may be replaced, and that life may continue."

I stare at him, full realization of the necromancers' obsessive superstition crawling across my skin. I am anxious to return home.

I avoid further news of the necromancers until the solar pulse comes. I don't see the actual flare, but I notice its effects: my connection to a dozen automata collecting water samples is severed, the cells I'm growing in my sanctum fall apart, and I perceive a thousand minor reactions in my own body. The fora immediately fill with discussion, and it's not long before the Gloriarch makes an announcement.

"All is well," she says. "The necromancers are adjusting their equipment and preparing for the rebirth. I ask your forgiveness and your patience, and promise that the tests will end soon."

Her words don't reassure me.

I find it difficult to view the necromancers without skepticism, and their motives elude me more the more I consider them. They are madmen, and possess far more power than madmen should have. They might do anything to our sun in the name of their beliefs; even if they have the intent and ability to do what they claim, who can guess what might alter the plans of lunatics?

I'm finally able to share my concerns with the Weatherman and the Architect when we meet to discuss the fallout of the solar pulse. Within the Architect's fractal home, we gaze at each other and ourselves through mirrors and hallways and staircases. We wear basic avatars; none of us can spare the mindpower for decorations.

We exchange data and equations and hypotheses almost as a formality, as if understanding the pulse and its consequences has any value in preparing for what's to come. It may, at that, but our spheres of influence are encompassed by the Gloriarch's; we are pulled along helplessly as she dances with the necromancers.

I am the first to broach the subject of the necromancers themselves. I summarize my encounters with them, then add, "I don't know how closely their goals align with ours, no matter what the Gloriarch believes."

The Weatherman responds with confident affirmation. "They shouldn't be here," he says. "Whatever their pretensions to serving a greater order, they are a source of chaos in the system."

"In more than one system," I amend. "How can they ever fit into a time or place, when they're always moving from one to the next?"

We're silent awhile before I speak again. "But the Gloriarch does believe. She sees value in our world's bargain with them, and there is nothing we can do."

I regulate my temperature and heartrate, signaling for calm from my companions. The Weatherman follows suit; I cannot read the Architect, and when he speaks, his inflection is matter-of-fact. "The ascetics are pleased," he says. "They dream of warming themselves on rocks and beaches under full daylight, and of growing food

without our aid, as their ancestors did. To them, the necromancers represent a revival of lost history.

"I think they fit well together. I think that all madmen share a sphere, no matter how they express their madness."

No one argues with the Architect, and our meeting soon adjourns. Each of us returns to our sanctum, re-devoted to our work.

There is a second solar pulse three days later. This one is weaker than the first, and the Gloriarch explains that it's a sign that the necromancers are nearly finished their fine-tuning. Once I've repaired the damage to my cultures and automata, I allocate a portion of my resources to observing the sky. If there is a third pulse, I hope I'll be forewarned by a few seconds. If not, maybe some trace particle will give me the key to creating life that will survive the coming sunrise.

the signals, and I haven't the skills to do so, regardless. But after quickly educating myself in the workings of dataspace, I track the source of the signals underground. I track the source of the signals to the planet's archives.

Someone is sending the necromancers information about our original bodies. Our core minds, safely stored, from which all our avatars are derived.

I don't know what to make of this discovery. I believed the necromancers when they told me they didn't use avatars – so what could their interest be in the archives? Why would anyone even care about our originals?

Just as important, who would help the necromancers loot the archives?

But as soon as I ask this last question, I have an answer. I call out to the Gloriarch, urging her to meet me even as I send an avatar to her palace. It's a rude gesture, but

I'm surprised by the density of the signals that have been sent between the planet and the necromancers' solar pylons

It takes a day before I'm comfortable monitoring the upper atmosphere. It's different up there than it is on the surface; without the static of civilization to crowd the view, the expanse of cosmic particles seems endless. There are moments when I think I understand why the Weatherman does what he does; wrapping one's self in another man's work can do that.

When I've finished marveling, my thoughts return to material affairs. I trouble myself awhile with rough plans for the coming season, then succumb to fatigue and send avatars into the city. I modify their brains to preclude worrisome thought and concern over larger matters, and luxuriate in their bright limbs as they celebrate with strangers. I relax in a bath of sensations with like-minded beings, wearing ribbons of burning color and suckling flesh encoded with memory. When I reintegrate my avatars, I fall into satisfied slumber.

I awaken refreshed, and review the logs that have been recorded in my absence. While studying the atmospheric, I'm surprised by the density of the signals that have been sent between the planet and the necromancers' solar pylons. I bounce a message from my sanctum to a moon and back, comparing it with the necromancers' communications. It's a whisper contrasted with a thunderbolt.

It's far too late for me to eavesdrop on

it's the only way to summon her attention on such short notice.

I am pacing in a cushioned waiting room when she joins me, smiling without urgency or concern. "What can I help you with, Gardener?" she asks.

"I'm worried about the necromancers," I say. "I suspect they have a hidden agenda, and believe they should be watched closely."

The Gloriarch shrugs. "And you think they act freely? I'm aware of all that transpires in the system, and it is my duty to react as I see fit."

I hide my annoyance, and wait long enough to make it seem as if I'm mulling over her words. "Are you aware," I ask, "that they're retrieving information from the archives?"

The Gloriarch's expression goes blank. "Are they?"

I transfer my logs to the Gloriarch and generate illustrative dataspace overlays as I speak, emphasizing each word with supporting evidence. "I don't know why, or for how long this has been occurring. But I can guess who's helping them gain access."

"Do continue," the Gloriarch says. I cannot read her tone or her body.

"I think," I say, wondering for an instant if my theory can stand the scrutiny of vocalization, "that the necromancers have struck a bargain with the ascetics. I think they are alike, and that the ascetics hope

their sphere will wax while ours wanes."

The Gloriarch closes her eyes. "It is an interesting idea," she says. "I shall take it under advisement."

I want to argue my position, but I've exhausted my facts. All I have left is a point of view, and the hope that I've shared it with the Gloriarch. I smile, and bow my head. "Please do. I appreciate your attention."

"Is there anything else?"

The question takes me by surprise; I haven't been dismissed. I look up at the Gloriarch, still trying to read her, and breathe deeply – deeply enough to pull floating specks of skin and air moist with saliva into my mouth. I taste them, and dismiss the overlays, close my ports of transmission. I separate myself fully from the woman before me.

"You're a golem, aren't you?" I ask.

"Yes," the golem says.

"Where's the Gloriarch?"

light, nor the clean light of the artificial moons, but an enveloping light that paints the world in shades of green and pale yellow. My monitors screech with static and imprint my brain with stellar cognizance before being cut off. The fora, too, fill with a cacophony of voices before crashing. Those networks that survive the pulse tickle the back of my mind, extant but unseen.

I don't know if the image that comes to me next is assembled from the last data of the dying monitors, or if it's simply a mental bulwark in the face of a tide of chaos. But in the light of our world's new sun, I'm sure I see the Gloriarch's face.

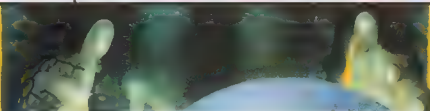
Two days later, the light has not faded.

Dataspace is silent. The streets are empty; no one can access the avatar templates, and few of us can build avatars from scratch, so vats of genetic material go untouched while civilization hides in the archives.

I've seen nothing of the necromancers' ship since the sun's rebirth, and I think I want them to be gone from the system. Let them be on their way, now that the harm is done. If their equipment still functions, I can hope to put it to use in the service of my world – although I don't know how, yet.

I work my way up the cylinder, noting how silent it seems without someone to talk to. I open the hatch at the top and rise into the domed control chamber. It's filled with fire-born light, the sun filling two-thirds of the walls. I shield my eyes until they adjust, then flinch as I see a silhouette standing behind the pedestal.

It is a necromancer, her suit bursting with light as it absorbs and expels the energy flooding the room. She faces away from me, staring at the sun, and it takes me a moment to realize that she doesn't wear a mask. Her head is hairless, and her skin is a sickly gray. She does not turn around.



The golem smiles sadly. "You are a Gardener. You perform your duties well, and the Gloriarch values them. But because you are a Gardener, you cannot understand what it is to be Gloriarch – to be responsible for the enduring majesty of our civilization, and to embody its greatness...."

I try to build a workable theory in my mind, but fail; the pieces don't stick together. "Is she the one sharing the archives with the necromancers?"

"She is," the golem says.

"Why?"

"She wanted me to wait before explaining to anyone," the golem says, "but it doesn't matter now. She needed to transfer her core to the necromancers. They are making her glory eternal."

I want to tear the golem apart. I want to read the matter in her skull and learn everything she knows. But I ask the questions. "How are they doing that? Where's the Gloriarch now?"

The golem walks past me toward the entrance to a balcony. "Come look," she says. "You should see her any minute."

I follow the golem, trying to come up with answers other than the one that grows cancerously in my mind. As I mirror the golem's skyward gaze, I turn a portion of my attention to my atmospheric monitors; I am helpless, but I will watch what happens in a hundred different ways.

Then light fills the sky. Not an aurora's

My avatar survives, so I get to watch my garden die under the fire of a relentless sun.

I'm certain – without ever seeing evidence – that the machinists are adapting the networks to the radiation, and that the archivists are securing all of us under their care. There is no question in my mind that civilization will survive. But the bombardment of particles is constant and battering, and I can only guess how much will be lost before we are restored.

So to save the culture that I know (if not the world), I obtain a transport and set flight for the solar pylons.

My avatar is a superman: strong, enduring, able to absorb and derive nutrients from the sun's deadly radiation, and capable of manufacturing any bacteria I desire. Molecular machines line its stomach, should I need them to repair my ship or interface with the pylons. The body will die within a month, of course – but I'll be back home, or dead from other causes before then.

Piloting the transport is difficult, but its innate intelligence is sufficient to bring me to the sun. Docking with a pylon – the same one, I hope, that I visited before – is more tricky, and I eventually resort to cables and a suit to transfer myself from one vessel to the other. Once I've pried the pylon's airlock open and secured myself inside, I float silently awhile, contemplating my options.

I think this is the necromancer I once described as young. I edge toward her, and call out, "Hello?"

She tilts her head, but still doesn't face me. "Hello," she says. "Who's there?"

It's strange to hear a necromancer speak without the filter of the suit. This one's voice is low and hoarse.

"I'm the Gardener. I think we met once," I say. "Where are the others?"

"I'm the only one," she says.

We both wait. I'm the next to speak. "I'm here to undo what you've done."

The necromancer pauses. "You don't believe in your Gloriarch?" she asks.

It never occurred to me to try; I exist within the Gloriarch's sphere, and can't look upon her from the outside. My loyalty to her was based on faith, and her actions severed that tie.

I move toward the necromancer. "No," I say. "I suppose not."

"I did," she says, and half-turns to me. I can see her face now: her skin is smooth, her nose is slender, and her lips are flat and dark. Her eyes are brown, glassy, and utterly still.

"You're blind," I murmur.

"I wanted to see her," she says, and turns back to stare at the sun. "I believed in her. I betrayed my brethren for her. So I decided I would look at her. I decided to let her touch me."

"I don't understand."

The necromancer flexes her fingers in a gesture I read as a shrug. "She came to me at the party. We talked, and she was amazing, and beautiful, and fascinated by what we did. Afterward, she asked...she asked if I could make the sun itself into her avatar. She wanted me to rewrite the sun's name with her own. I said yes."

"Why?" I ask.

"Her ascension lets her spread her glory across the universe. Her light will travel outward for millennia, and her name will touch countless worlds – long after your planet dies. It was how she wanted to preserve you."

The words are like a seed planted in my mind. There is power to them, but I don't know what they'll become until they're watered by introspection and experience.

I shake my head. "But why did you agree?"

The necromancer chokes on a laugh. "I've spent my life working toward a goal that will mean nothing until the end of time. Nothing I do here and now matters. The Gloriarch asked me, 'What's the good of eternity with no one to bear witness?' And I agreed."

Then she lowers her voice and adds, "And she promised to take me with her. She promised she'd join my name with hers. She didn't."

"The others didn't know?"

"They wouldn't have allowed it. When it happened...they left. They said nothing, and they left me behind."

My attention drifts to the sun, and my eyes create shapes from the formless mass of flames. I see the Gloriarch, and the spires of the world's cities, and spots that drift like the artificial moons.

"Will you help me undo this?" I ask.

The necromancer's expression doesn't change as she considers. "It can't be undone," she says. "The pylons can resurrect a star, but not kill one."

"It can be changed, though. Her name can be changed. It could be made to nurture."

"Will you help me?" I repeat, more urgently.

"I can't," the necromancer whispers. "But I'll give you this."

She holds out both hands, palms up, as if warming herself. I cross in front of her and take her hands in mine. The suit's gloves feel hot, and I try to jerk away as I feel the black material wrap over my knuckles and flow toward my wrists. The necromancer grips my fingers, however, and the suit pours over my arms and across my body

even as it bares its owner.

The suit cools as I lose sight of my skin, and I stop resisting as it encloses my face. I feel the necromancer let go, and for a few seconds I'm trapped in cushioned darkness. Then the darkness begins glowing – colors are laid over one another, rippling like sheets of silk. I notice bulges and indentations in the layers, breaking or pooling waves of color, and I realize what I'm seeing.

The suit views the world through energy: through light and heat and radiation. Matter isn't revealed by light, but interrupts it – or creates it. It's beautiful, and I wonder why I never thought to create eyes that see this way.

But then, why should I have?

The suit feeds me necromancer lore, and I start to unpack the metaphors of names and souls. I still don't comprehend them, but I can see them – I know intuitively how

Transforming the sun isn't so different from gardening. Electrons, like genes, must be properly sequenced

they interact.

I look at the orb on the pedestal. It's a void, a gap in the layers of energy – but the pylon speaks with the suit, and catches the focus of my eyes. The orb blossoms into a dataspace overlay of the innards of the sun itself. This, too, is beyond my understanding, but I can touch it. Manipulate it.

I set myself to the task of rewriting the sun's name.

I spend days exploring, learning the body of my star and testing possible scenarios with the pylons' computers. The necromancer advises me when it pleases her; the rest of the time she appears catatonic, not speaking, sleeping or eating. It's enough to help me overcome the obstacles in my path, and I develop a plan.

A week later, I'm ready to act. I lower my mask long enough to inform the necromancer. A nod is her only acknowledgment.

Transforming the sun isn't so different from gardening. Electrons, like genes, must be properly sequenced. Nuclear reactions multiply like cells. Control is impossible once a subject is set loose, but its future can be predicted if one knows its environment. The work goes surprisingly quickly as I prune and water and plant.

The sun starts to contract, preparing to burn away its outermost layer and return to a more sustainable form – one that I'm told

will be kinder to the system. I withdraw from the orb, and place my hand on the necromancer's shoulder. "It's starting. Will you come with me?" I ask.

She doesn't move. "No," she says.

I check the status of the sun, estimating the time until the pulse occurs. "Then take the suit – if the pylon survives, it'll protect you from the radiation..."

This coaxes a smile from her. "Go, Gardener," she says.

And I do.

Once in the transport, I quietly wait for the sun – the Gloriarch, I suppose, for at least a few moments more – to pass judgment upon me. The vessel thrusts toward my home, and I think it will be safe from the worst of the flare...but there are other dangers, to the mechanisms and my body. I have little hope of surviving. My core is safe in the archives, of course, but that's only mildly comforting.

I don't see the light when the pulse comes. I feel my body prickle, almost painfully in my extremities, and I see the suit's visuals disappear. Trapped in that darkness, I barely realize when I fall.

I am cold when I wake, loosely strapped to a padded metal slab in a dimly lit room. I immediately withdraw into myself, checking the composition of my body. The cellular damage is minimal, though the avatar will never completely recover. Still, it's a surprising and pleasing discovery.

"You will forgive us for retrieving the suit," a voice says.

I return to the outside world, and look across the room to the first necromancer I met. We are aboard his ship; I recognize the design from my previous time aboard, and the location from schematics the suit fed me.

I unbuckle my straps and float free, stretching my limbs. "Forgiven," I say. "What of its owner?"

"Former owner," the necromancer amends. "She is no longer one of us. Her fate is not our concern."

I scowl. It's easier to find sympathy for a face than for a mask, regardless of the deeds of their wearers. "And the fate of my world?"

"We were not without grief. But the deed had been done, and we could not risk becoming tainted through communion

with the abomination. If the traitor so desired, she could have saved your planet."

"She did," I say, "although it took some convincing."

"Did she?" the necromancer asks.

"Strange, then, that it was you wearing the suit."

I don't have a ready answer to this. Instead, I glance at the wall, thinking about the void behind it.

"We recovered your ship," the necromancer says. "It should suffice to return you home. The sun has stabilized, and will not harm you further."

"Good." I rotate and push off toward the hatch.

The necromancer leads the way into the hall, not looking back at me. "Of course," he says, "you do have another option. We leave for the Seven Colonies within the hour, but our coterie is now one member short. You've displayed your skill already..."

For an instant, I see myself among the necromancers. I see my sphere crossing out of the Gloriarch's and into theirs, and embrace the world I saw within the suit.

"No," I say.

The necromancer doesn't visibly react, but grips a handrail and begins to venture toward the docking bay. "Very well," he says.

I follow him, and my mind lingers in the image it's formed, suspended in two worlds. I wonder what the Seven Colonies are like, and whether life still flourishes there. I wonder what impact the necromancers will have, and if their visit to that system will go better than their visit to ours. But there's little I can do, and it's not a subject worth my attention. I'll be dead by the time they arrive.

Then, suspended in two worlds, a seed planted in my mind sprouts and grows. There's little I can do – but I can leave a legacy.

My stomach churns as we proceed, and my skin becomes flushed. The necromancer doesn't appear to notice; I think he's distracted by navigating the ship through the suit's interface. I try to recall what my suit told me about organization and sensors and security protocols.

We pass over a hatch, and I pause there. My lips purse, my tongue curls, and I blow, launching flecks of spittle toward the floor. I move on before the necromancer turns around.

Once I reach the transport, I head home, and find that the world has – for the most

part – returned to its old ways. The fora are available again, and we lie about our heroism and revelations from the period of the crash. The streets are full, and new avatars appear by the hundreds. The incarnation of a new Gloriarch has begun.

The sun is bright, but not unbearable. In the ruins of my garden, I'm surprised how many creatures are adapting and surviving. The Weatherman is rerouting the moons and adjusting their brilliance, and the Architect is programming his buildings to shift over the course of the day. We exchange ideas regarding the theme for the coming season: light and shade seems the obvious choice, but we've time to choose yet.

It's not difficult to reinstate my routine. My sphere returns to its place in the cosmos, and life is as it should be. Gardening has not lost its challenge or excitement, and I've started a dozen new experiments.

Some days, however, my mind does stray into orbits it didn't venture into before. I think about how many days the Gloriarch's light shone, and I wonder how long it will be before that light reaches a civilized system. I wonder how long it will be before someone in the universe sees a name in that light, and if they will understand our world. I envision the Gloriarch's light crossing a million other stars, and I think she may have won her eternity – however briefly.

I wonder, too, how long it will be before the necromancers notice the gift I left them. I wonder if, long after I'm gone, they will reach the Seven Colonies and build their pylons – and only then realize something's wrong.

The machines I tore from my stomach and sent into the ship should have found their target by now. They were programmed with the knowledge of the suit, and should have little trouble locating the orb carrying the soul of the Seven Colonies' star. There, they'll release their passengers: microorganisms designed for swift reproduction and adaptation, coded with my DNA and that of a traitorous necromancer.

The organisms will burrow into the orb. They will find heat, and energy, and radiation. And in a few hundred years...

I don't know what they'll be.

But I'm content in my garden, with many seasons to anticipate. I don't ever need to find out. ▣

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Are you watching closely? This is the Nic Roeg Three-Way Finesse in the Nolan Variation. Watch my hands: you take your deck of three-by-fives with the scenes of your movie in order, and you cut them exactly twice, making three piles of roughly equal size. Now take the first two piles and riffle them back together, being careful to interlace them exactly. Then take your third pile and riffle it into the one you've just made. Don't shuffle. Make sure the card that was on the bottom of the original pile stays on the bottom. Now deal your cards. Audiences will follow your hands and watch the cards without being able to work out what the hell you've done. It looks random, but it's not; you've got three timelines running in linear sequence, with the final reveal at the end where it always was. So far, *Bad Timing*. Now we add the variation Chris Nolan originally introduced in his calling-card Brit flick *Following*: keep two cards at the bottom of the deck instead of one, and flip the second-last card to the top so your ending starts at the beginning but without the reveal. That's **The Prestige**. Good, eh? But that's not the trick. Here's your wallet back that I stole while you were watching the cards. And your underpants. And your girlfriend.

If nothing else, the Nolan brothers' astounding vanish-and-restore of Christopher Priest's novel of feuding Victorian conjurors is the most technically audacious piece of screenwriting since *Eternal Sunshine*. In fact, the Nolans

are like something out of a Priest novel themselves: a pair of full brothers who operate as a single entity while weirdly looking and sounding nothing like one another. Chris, the British one, apparently uses American kid brother Jonathan as a double when his *Batman* diary is too full to make script deadlines, and indeed the original, linear drafts of *The Prestige* seem to have been Jonathan's solo work before Chris got to work with his trademark narrative shuffle. But Jonathan Nolan is enigmatic enough that, video evidence of his existence notwithstanding, he sometimes seems like a twin brother of *Adaptation's* Donald Kaufman. It's not clear what he actually does outside his brother's films, on which he's mostly worked uncredited as a behind-scenes creative *ingénieur*. Even Jonathan's famous story 'Memento Mori', credited as the source for Chris's breakout film *Memento*, was actually finished after the film and published on the back of its release. As in real magic, the truth can only be banal; but the effect is one of enticing mystery.

That, of course, is precisely the space explored by the non-identical twin versions of *The Prestige* in print and in film. Both magicians, we learn in the setup phase of the book but only at the end of the film, are living their lives around a secret that in different ways is sublimated in the teleportation trick that makes both of them famous. For mundane magic professionals like Michael Caine's backstage *ingénieur*,

the illusion can only be run by using a double, which is exactly what neither is doing. Instead, each works the trick by bizarrely idiosyncratic means which the other's distinctive professional imagination is maddeningly unable to comprehend, and which indeed could hardly be imagined as coexisting anywhere but in a Priest novel. In part it's an sf puzzle, with a line back to the steampunk Priest of *The Space Machine*, and Nicola Tesla (on whose bizarre career Hollywood has been trying to get a biopic together for years) playing a key role in the solution. Yet the heart of the novel is what is still today a perfectly standard technique in ordinary stage magic – with the crucial difference that in real life it's only used to teleport assistants, and making the transported man the magician himself introduces staggering and ultimately tragic complexities whose inscription in the illusionist's journal is the novel's first great, and most quintessentially Priestly, *tour de force*.

Needless to say, the most impossible trick of all is adapting any of this for the screen. The sequencing of reveals in the novel centres on a brilliant device, too daring for film, in which the reader is early on led to believe that we know exactly how one character does the trick, only to be told halfway through that everyone else in the book has long since made the same guess and it's wrong. What's more, the novel's own climax pointedly centres not on the secret behind the illusion, but on the modern-day plot dealing with the impact of the feud and the secrets on the original magicians' families three generations later. The Nolans have made the difficult but probably smart decision to lose this layer of the novel entirely, essential though it is to both Priest's overall concept and the structure of his ending, where past and present come devastatingly together. In doing so, they remain remarkably true to the novel's revelation of what its revelation really is: not the comparatively trivial secret of how the trick is done, but the cost and consequences for the Hugh Jackman character, where the Nolans have introduced a genuinely inspired and horrible improvement on the original's unsettling finale.

The toughest challenge of all has been the obsessive secrecy of Christian Bale's character, which the novel breaks only by allowing him to confide to a journal.

MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

Though the journal device is bravely retained in the film version, its presence revalidated by a stunning double twist of the Nolans' own, it's proved intractable to reproduce the lightly-encrypted secret of the original journal, relying as it does on a virtuoso trick of novelistic voice. The film has tried to address this in two ways: by a rather weak plot device of encipherment (which implausibly retards the reading of the journal over a period of months, though the non-linear timeline cleverly masks the awkward chronology); and by the uncomfortable addition, in its passion for false symmetries and tricks with mirrors, of a second *ingénieur* to balance the heightened prominence of the Caine character, and in whom Bale can confide on-screen in a way that the plot forbids him to do with wife and mistress. But it's precisely here, at the heart of the film, that the apparatus of illusion fails to operate as planned. The script performs its reveal with the wishful direction "Realization sweeps over Angier like a nightmare," followed by a smash cut to a reprised key shot from an earlier scene in which "We see, for the first time," something that was in the original shot and indeed many others, but was passed over in silence in the script descriptions of all those scenes. Unfortunately, you can type this stuff, but you can't show it. While you can perform this kind of finesse in a written screenplay, the reality is that you can't control what the audience does or doesn't see of what you put on screen, and that most viewers of *The Prestige* easily observe the narrative apparatus in question being smuggled into place under the cover of misdirection long before they're supposed to. (Woman next to me at screening, in an excited whisper to her date as the penny drops an hour in: "It's him!") It's to the director's credit that even a viewer familiar with the novel doesn't spot the sleight at once; but with most of two hours to study the screen for clues, it's optimistic to expect a tuned-in, Nolan-savvy audience to miss entirely what the camera has to show that the screenplay doesn't.

On the other hand, in a high-wire performance like this it's possible to forgive the occasional stumble, particularly when the astonishing final sequence recovers so strongly from the drop. Like his characters, Nolan is essentially a dazzling showman,

and he uses his skills of misdirection to cloak a rather refreshing preference for targeting the head where Hollywood dogma favours the heart. His early, career-making films *Following* and *Memento* were flamboyant narrative sleights of hand whose actual stories look flimsier with each revisit; and though in interviews he pays lip-service to the claim that his *Prestige* is an emotionally-centred tale of obsession, if that's really what it's trying to be then it falls straight through its own floor without a mattress. (Scarlett Johansson's character has one flimsy monologue in which to explain her inexplicable motivation, on which the novel is wisely coy; she gives it her best shot, but it's doomed.) What instead makes *The Prestige* so uniquely haunting and affecting, in a way that equals the similarly resonant hollowness at the centre of *Memento*, is two things: the power and resonance of its superb final twist, whose major forerunner is Budrys' *Rogue Moon*; and its frank dissection of the terrible banality of the prestidigitator's art and the terrible cost of that art to the life that truly dedicates itself to it. As Bale explains, "They'll beg you and they'll flatter you for the secret, but as soon as you give it up you're no one. The secret impresses no one; the trick you use it for is everything." It's a lesson that goes back to Jonah's confessed dismay after Chris unilaterally disambiguated the ending of *Memento* to the Italian press in an early interview at

the Venice Film Festival, a giveaway from which both swiftly learned; by the time of the DVD special-edition release, there were three alternate interpretations of the ending concealed in different versions of the commentary.

Given all this, it hardly matters that, like the entirely fictional three-act model of magic with which the film begins and ends, it's ultimately all complete flim-flam. If the film doesn't quite live up to the brilliance of its script – not least because all three principals are subtly miscast, though very watchably so – it's still one of the most ambitious adaptations ever seen of a literary sf novel. All too aware that many of the things that make the novel extraordinary are too complex and, frankly, intelligent to be reproduced on screen, it takes it apart and puts it back together again with some of the most virtuosic narrative clockwork ever attempted on screen. Yet it also sends you back to the novel itself, and to things that the filmmakers have picked up and transformed that you missed entirely on a first pass. I think, but can't be sure, that one of the performances actually attempts to reproduce a novelistic effect hinted at by Priest's use of that celebrated movie signifier, the ampersand – which in Writer's Guild code indicates that the named screenwriters worked as a team rather than the first author being sacked and replaced by the second. Under the circumstances, it seems more than a little apt.



Both the struggle of heart and head and the rival arts of novel and film play out rather differently in Marc Forster's *Stranger than Fiction*, in which Will Ferrell's anal-retentive taxman is loosened up by the discovery, through a mysterious narrator's voice in his head, that he's a character in blocked novelist Emma Thompson's latest and she's trying to kill him off. Forster is a generally reliable director with a weakness for hot screenplays that turn out on serving to need a bit more time in the oven; he's remembered for *Monster's Ball* and *Finding Neverland* but significantly forgotten for the more recent *Stay*, a spec script by the then-bankable David Benioff that sold for over a million dollars and then sank without a bubble in its filmed version.

Stranger than Fiction, which ominously revisits rather similar territory to *Stay*, is a

lavish coming-out ball for ageing debutant screenwriter Zach Helm, optimistically promoted as the next Charlie Kaufman but on this evidence more like the previous Richard Curtis. Certainly one key difference from even the sub-par Kaufman of *Human Nature* and *Adaptation* is that *Stranger than Fiction* is, frankly, pants. For a start, the shaky logic has a massive unrepaired hole in the fact that the film and the novel-within-a-film have completely different plots; there is no voice in the hero's head in the novel, nor any metaliterary quest to make contact with the author, so that none of the character's motivation makes any novelistic sense that we can see. Indeed, such extracts as we're vouchsafed from Thompson's masterpiece make it sound like the most amateurish twaddle ever pecked out, and the ten-years-pondered ending lavishly hailed by Dustin Hoffman's literature prof as "perfect, simple, ironic, possibly heartbreaking," and by its own author as "poetic" and "meaningful," turns out to be the most clapped-out movie cliché since the last one.

This is entirely symptomatic. Throughout, the film shows a distrubing incomprehension of what literary fiction actually does and a smug triumphalist complacency that movies know best, with their bullet-pointed theories of story and monolithic hero-driven narrative closure. Nevertheless, the film is even-handed in its giving of offence, and if anything the makers and teachers of literature get off lightly compared with mathematicians. Ferrell's beautiful mind for maths, which manifests in such sophisticated demonstrations of formal manipulation of abstraction as obsessive counting and being able to do simple multiplication on three-digit numbers, is seen as the root of all his problems: no girlfriend, no life, no personality, a career in absolute evil enforcing the US government's claim on a small slice of its citizens' income. To break away, he must embrace the anti-mathematical world of anarchism and cookie-making – this being a film in which smoking is very very bad, but the production and consumption of high-calorie comfort snacks is good good yummy good good.

The solipsism of the whole enterprise is, not for the first time, disturbingly diagnostic of the pathological schizoid dissociation at the heart of the Hollywood doctrine of herocentrism. As far as the film is concerned, Ferrell's character exists in a



one-man universe; no thought whatever is spared for all the other characters, notably Maggie Gyllenhaal's preposterously-written love interest, who are also presumably dangling on the end of Thompson's strings. There are, to be sure, some funny lines, Ferrell is rather good at being dull, and the writer's cheeky attempt to choose his own soundtrack (the script originally went out accompanied by a CD of songs specified by title, artist, and track number in the scenes) has been sensibly overwritten with a generally much better selection. It must be Forster who realised, brilliantly, that the most romantic song in the western canon is not the Dead Milkmen's 'Punk Rock Girl' (Helm's prescription) but Wreckless Eric's 'Whole Wide World', though even this doesn't quite flush away the aftertaste left by Gyllenhaal's ovaries going ping at the chatup line "I want you." (Chaps: do NOT try this with a real-life human female.) But these nuggets of added value don't redeem the nutritional value of what remains a squidgy, overpriced mass of sugar and fat whose bland digestibility is followed by a belated wish that you hadn't.

Reality and fantasy lock rather harder horns in Guillermo del Toro's **Pan's Labyrinth**, a hard-fought personal project sandwiched between lucrative *Hellboy* movies much as *The Prestige* won diary space between *Batmans*, and which continues the Mexican master's alternation of big Hollywood fantasy with teeny-budgeted Spanish-language originals. Like its 2001 predecessor *The Devil's Backbone*, *Pan's Labyrinth* mixes genre fantasy and a child's-eye view with the real-world violence and treachery of the early Franco era, in a glossy, faintly meretricious but undeniably potent manifesto for the dissident power of the imagination in a world of jackbooted repression, as the ten-year-old heroine, stepdaughtered to a luridly brutal fascist commander, falls deeper and deeper into a private rabbit-hole of dreams that promises her heart's desire but may have just the opposite in mind. The opening shot uses the same trick as the celebrated title sequence of Nolan's *Memento*, promising a bitter end from the outset. But as the moral worlds of child and adult, fairytale and politics converge



in the course of the series of magical tasks assigned by the sinister faun (not actually Pan at all, but the tauter English title was del Toro's own choice), the question becomes less about what will happen than about whether the choices made will prove to have been the right ones. If the Buñuelisms of *Backbone* have given way to a more contemporary designer fairytale in this unlikely hybrid of *Spirit of the Beehive* with *Mirrormask*, del Toro's trademark surrealist imagery of clockwork, insects, and Catholic kitsch are as richly on display as ever. Like his close shooting buddies Alejandro Gonzales Iñárritu (who gave creative input in post-production) and especially Alfonso Cuarón (who at one stage had del Toro approached to succeed him on *Harry Potter*, and has a producer credit here), del Toro has learned a lot about making small films from his Hollywood experience making big ones. He turned down *Narnia* for this – not just out of distaste for its cosy Anglican version of redemption, but also because it was simply the right choice to make, whatever the cost.

The struggle to complete *Pan's Labyrinth* well exemplifies the increasing challenge faced by even the most energetic and inventive of non-Anglophone filmmakers in competing visually with global studio effects budgets. That's one reason why, until now, the vibrant and prolific new Korean cinema hasn't crossed over internationally, in contrast to the Mexican posse headed up by del Toro and his riding companions. But Bong Joon-ho's **The Host** represents a turning-point: the first Korean film with big western-style digital effects, which have duly made it both the most expensive and the most successful Korean film in history. An enthusiastic deadpan satire about an American-spawned mutant monster terrorising the grey urban reaches of Seoul's Han river, it pits a variously feckless family of local noodle-sellers against the contrasting incompetences of their own administration and the mad-eyed US military, as they race to rescue the dozy hero's daughter from the subterranean lair of mutant evil before the clueless Yanks napalm the lot of them

back to the Precambrian. Obligatory tropes of the genre are wittily bounced off a deadpan sense of cultural difference, with the anti-heroic ordinariness of characters and setting conveyed nicely in the rainswept grey-green palette of concrete under overcast, and there's none of that Hollywood nonsense about saving the full-body FX shot for act three; here, the Weta-built monster comes rampaging down the banks in plain sight and slurping up citizens like potsnacks before the characters have even finished being established.

And in a gleeful hand gesture to the western movie imperialists, the nitwit American military response is wryly contrasted with a society where old-fashioned rioting is proudly part of the culture: as the family's lone graduate sibling demonstrates, a college education may not get you a job, but it does teach you to throw petrol bombs with plot-stopping accuracy, a skill we'll all need once the mutant carp start coming up out of the Thames at Blackfriars. You smile, but keep watching. You'll see. **Nick Lowe**

Fragile Things

Neil Gaiman • Review, 366pp, £17.99 hb

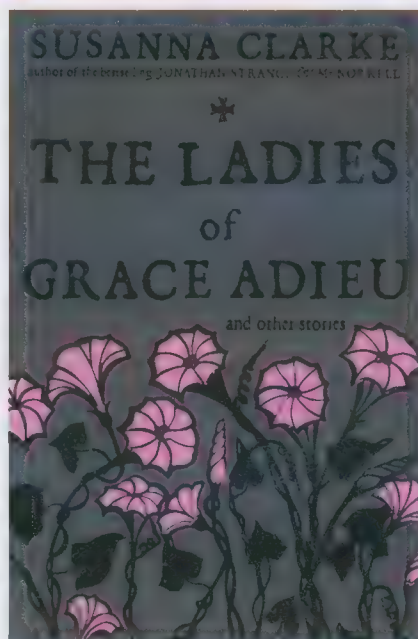


Neil Gaiman Fragile Things

Illustrated by Dave McKean

The Ladies of Grace Adieu

Susanna Clarke • Bloomsbury, 235pp, £25 hb



Both of these collections are strange and frightening, yet ultimately wonderful. While taking different routes, they arrive at the same unearthly destination – Faerie. The land which they describe is not the cuddly version but the older, more frightening overlap with reality. The fantastic is a way to give shape to the other side of the world: to give the less powerful a chance to turn the tables or to be an outlet for darker emotions. It's a dangerous and beguiling area.

The Susanna Clarke collection is frustrating in its incompleteness. It has a pleasing shape to it but it misses out 'Stop Clock King', the short story written for the *Sandman* collection (and this is not the only time Clarke ventures into Gaiman territory). I remember chasing halfway across Leicester, getting some money to purchase the *Sandman* book just before the shop closed and came across the tragically optimistic tagline about Clarke finishing off her first novel. Like so many other readers, I waited for some years.

Ladies of Grace Adieu is a collection of eight tales, most of which are reminiscent of Jane Austen. The collection comes with the warning that the world of Faerie is easily crossed into, usually without knowing that the boundary has been crossed. It's an apt warning as various characters do indeed wander into the fantastic and lose something dear to them – from a grip on a sense of reality to the threat to livelihood. It's a more unpredictable world than the land in which we live but there is still the application of Reason to keep the world in

order. Underneath it all, there is a system of rules by which the world operates. It is not a land which is confined within its own boundaries but it helps to shape the Matter of the Land.

There are two stories set in the world of the Raven King, the title story and the closing story, 'John Uskglass and the Cumbrian Charcoal Burner'. In 'Ladies of Grace Adieu', Jonathan Strange travels to the village of Grace Adieu in Derbyshire and is caught up in the Wild Magic of the countryside. The Ladies effortlessly outwit the studied, and by now urban, magic of Jonathan Strange but it is by no means merely in their actions. Clarke's Austen style works in this short story, rather than the barrel of a novel of Jonathan Strange. It has a light touch and the wit in the language comes through, giving the supposedly powerless the upper hand. The wildness of the Matter of England presents itself and is expressed in the genteel confines of polite discourse.

The Raven King stars in the closing tale in which he indulges in the sport of kings,

persecuting the poor. A Charcoal Burner has his wood burned by the Raven King and goes in search of his tormenter until he comes across a monk who is equally adept at magic and makes a fool of the king.

'The Duke of Wellington Loses his Horse' is a typical example of how the mighty can be defeated by the smallest things but it is also set in the world of Wall, the setting for Neil Gaiman's *Stardust*. While the original novel neatly took fairy tales apart from a loving stance, Clarke draws from the world and puts her own spin on it. Interestingly though, she comes to a similar conclusion to Gaiman that creators affect the world, that narratives are overlaid by all and can give shape to events if they are believed. It is theme reprised in 'Anticks and Frets', which is a compact little Renaissance tale and breaks Clarke out of the eighteenth century mould.

The Charles Vess illustrations throughout add to the charm of the book, balancing the tales. Given that his Green Man Press originally published the Wall story and he has often illustrated the tales of Faerie, it seems only right for Vess to be involved and it also provides another link to Neil Gaiman. The collection has a pleasing feel to it but it would great to read more of Clarke outside of the Regency.

In comparison, *Fragile Things* is a rag tag compendium which skilfully sprawls and skitters across a variety of styles and genres. This not a criticism, far from it. This is Gaiman's third collection of short stories and the most substantial yet, with one or two poems thrown in for good measure. The opening section serves as a set of nested introductions to each short story and includes a short story within it as well. As he explains in several snippets in the mini forewords, he believes that stories need to be retold to survive. The poem 'Aladdin' plays with this idea, while also enjoying the structures and tales of the Arabian Nights, showing how stories carry on being retold, and also getting towards the individual's desire to create.

In 'The Mapmaker', the nested short in the introduction, the emperor of China wants to have a map created of all his lands; this becomes his obsession but while this map is being completed, the emperor is dreaming of a larger map of the land. One that is life size. It is a personal quest which will get bigger but could it ever be satisfied?

The wonderfully titled 'Forbidden Brides of the Faceless Slaves in the Secret House of the Night of Dread Desire' takes the stock themes of Gothic fantasy and inverts them

ON WRITING SHORT STORIES

NEIL GAIMAN & SUSANNA CLARKE

so beautifully while also getting to heart of writing in fantastic genres. In the midst of a writer struggling through writer's block, he writes parts of a Gothic Romance while he is in turn surrounded by little snippets from Poe's writing. Perhaps the story also echoes Gaiman's reasons for writing in the genre – as the butler says to the failing scribe when the scribe complains that the fantasy is not life: "it's what you'd be writing if you knew what was good for you." The beginnings of the saga point to something that seems to be forgotten, that one person's fantastic is another's real, while perhaps also being seen as advice to anybody who wants to write.

While musing on the creative urge, Gaiman also makes us look at the world with a view askew. In 'How to Talk to Girls at Parties', two boys, nascently into punk, get invited to a party and end up at the wrong one. The awkwardness of talking to strangers reveals itself as quite something else and the humorous consequences become something altogether more horrific and uncomfortable. True to form, the event is left entirely in the reader's mind but it comes as quite a shock.

'Sunbird' is a homage to R.A. Lafferty, one of the people to whom this anthology is dedicated, and it breaks with the general theme of 'a slice of life' which runs through the collection. On one hand it is a commentary on the perils of gluttony while also being a short story that tells the reader precisely what is going on without in fact telling the reader anything at all. Another dedicatee is Ray Bradbury, for whom the story 'October in the Chair' was reprinted in the *Conjunctions New Wave Fabulists* volume. In both stories Gaiman develops the voices and atmospheres of Lafferty and Bradbury while also keeping something of himself in it. Gaiman also delivers a club tale which plays with the rules of the story, quite rigidly setting the rules and then gleefully breaking them.

While he adopts and adapts the tone of some of his own influences, Gaiman rarely writes any sequels, though the reprinted 'Monarch of the Glen' is an exception. He comes back to Shadow, from *American Gods*, and transports him to the outer reaches of mainland Scotland, to a small

village. He's asked to help guard a private party at a secluded house. On arrival, he comes across a security team and is informed about the host's true intentions. The secluded party is really a bare knuckle match between the Old and New Worlds. The theme of being an outsider is brought back to the middle land, the crossing point between the mythic stories and the newer stories (that are seen as upstarts). Gaiman talks about Shadow being a monster and one is lead to question precisely who is the monster. What does make the monster or the true Monarch of the Glen? The physical form or the situation in which the character finds himself? Typically the onion layers are left to the reader and perhaps the story tails off in its threat to the main protagonist. As a character Shadow retains his dignity and fulfils both roles, he is both Beowulf and Grendel in this retelling.

These are untamed books, drawing their strength and influence from the dawn of fantasy while also being fiercely modern. Ultimately they reveal a shape to our lives, showing part of the world as it might be, perhaps ought to be. While Clarke allows for Faerie to cross hatch the real world, Gaiman happily overlays the Real with the Fey. At each point, both he and Clarke reveal the shape of the world, whether it is set in contemporary London or the wilds of the Other Lands. Gaiman does this most obviously with his short story set in the *Matrix* world, 'Goliath', posted on the original film site, allowing the central construction time to change the wrongs in his life but to also question his own existence, even the Creator. We mould the world according to the way in which we tell it, looking at the human or not; the powerful or not. We need to retell the stories which create the Matter of the Land and remember them, for this seems to be the only way of protecting ourselves from the fate of Shadow or the Duke of Wellington. Most importantly, these are books that present ways of telling fantastic stories which do not rely upon their settings for their wonder but the stories and the language in which they are told, revealing part of the matter of Fantasy. The world becomes a stranger and more dangerous place to exist in. **Iain Emsley**



photo © Sophia Quach

NEIL GAIMAN

Novels are like mountain climbing, you have to do your preparation, get up each morning, look up, check the map, check your equipment and start climbing, knowing that you're going to get cold and lonely. Writing a short story, when it works, is the equivalent of looking over and thinking it might be fun to try and climb that tree. And you just shin straight up it. Most of the time.

I tend to create things that take quite a while. *Sandman* was almost a decade and I don't think it would have been anywhere near as much fun if I couldn't have stopped and occasionally done short stories. I'd be working on something a long time and I'd start missing the idea of doing something short story based, something I could finish by tea-time or at least by Saturday. I'd go off and do a few of those and then I'd start getting grumpy because when you do a short story, you have to create the entire world in the first word and it's kind of nice to have a world that you've already created. So when I was doing *Sandman* I alternated between doing big, long storylines and shorter things and that was kind of fun.

With *American Gods* it was very similar. I'd go and do four or five short stories, that I wrote either when I was stuck on the main storyline or to do what I did on *Sandman* – which was bring a louder, wider, bigger, broader canvas than I had in just a novel, to give points of view and create a world that otherwise I wouldn't have seen.

When I'm writing short stories normally

what I get is a bizarre satisfaction. I also love it when things work. There's a story in *Fragile Things* called 'How to Talk to Girls at Parties' which began as an idea in my head for a short story about the alien equivalent of a teenage girl wandering around Earth as a tourist. I made some notes towards it but it wasn't really working. Eventually, I decided to email the editors who had asked for it to say it's not going to happen because we're out of time. And I got an email back from him saying, "What a pity and by the way Kelly Link wrote her story in twenty-four hours." It was 11AM on a Sunday when I picked up the email and I thought *Right you bastard*, and grabbed my notebook and went down to the little gazebo at the bottom of the garden and just started writing. By late that afternoon I came back down from the garden, grabbed the first human being I saw and said, "Sit down, I want to read something to you." I read the finished story, typed it up and sent it off to the editor.

So that was lovely – when a short story works and it comes fast and it surprises you. When it isn't even there before you write it, I always get the vague feeling that maybe I've just clawed one over on Fate and Time.



photo © Mark Pringle

SUSANNA CLARKE

Short stories scare me. I mean the writing of them.

A novel takes hold of me. Some character taps me on the shoulder, says, "I'm here," (he always seems to think I was expecting him) and then refuses to leave. A novel sucks in everything: bits of landscape, bits of history, facts about wheelwrights, sudden inspirations concerning dogs, ideas about God, etc, etc. It's a process that seems partly independent of me. A novel

is something that happens to me. A short story is something I have to make happen. Usually there is a deadline and all of a sudden I have to pull this thing out myself. Each time I feel a little bit panicked.

The first thing I do is I look at my file of story ideas on the computer. It's a woefully small collection. Next I feel discouraged. Then something weird happens. Every single time I fix on the same idea. This idea consists of a piece of writing, maybe two or three pages long, that I did in 1993 and which I really like. Every time I become convinced that I'm going to expand it and turn it into a story. And every time I change my mind two days later and settle on a completely different idea. This ritual seems to be something I have to go through.

Then I always read a book. Or several books. Sometimes the connection to the story I'm going to write is fairly straightforward. For 'Antickes and Frets' – a story about Mary, Queen of Scots, doing embroidery – I read books on the embroidery of Mary, Queen of Scots. But other times it's altogether more tenuous. Once I read Keith Thomas's *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500–1800*. Now what story was that for? Not a clue. In the last week I've prepared for a new story by reading about the Elgin Marbles, yet I do not believe that either Elgin or his Marbles will appear.

Whatever. The reading seems to calm me down; the progression of facts and dates readies me for fiction writing. Then, with any luck, I can actually settle down and write the thing.

When I was young I read an anthology of literary short stories in a dutiful way. I thought I understood what short stories ought to be: they are about restricted lives and grey, lonely afternoons, and are pervaded by a uniform atmosphere of futility and melancholy. The writer who knocked these daft notions out of me was Jorge Luis Borges. Stories like *The House of Asterion* and *Three Versions of Judas* made my hair stand on end, made me dizzy. His short fiction is constructed from everything that fascinated him: Lovecraftian monsters, fictional encyclopaedias, religious oddities, labyrinths and libraries. He did science fiction stories, cowboy stories, myths, detective stories and fake scholarship. He copied and invented and mimicked any literary form he fancied. Now, thank goodness, I haven't a clue what a short story ought to be.

The pb of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* is available now.

The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters

G.W. Dahlquist • Viking, 751pp, £25 hb/£16.99 pb

In *The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters*, Dahlquist has attempted to resurrect the serial novel form of the Victorian era. The first edition of the book was produced in a limited run of ten weekly instalments in late 2006, with the collected hardback edition released in January 2007. The serial covers ooze old world charm, promising mystery, excitement and high adventure.

Dream Eaters tells the story of a wicked cabal and their dastardly plot to take over the world, using the titular glass books to steal the dreams of the rich and powerful. These dreams can be used to control others through 'the process', a kind of steam-punk version of brainwashing. Unfortunately for the cabal, one of their number has recently jilted our heroine, a feisty heiress named Celestial Temple. She decides to get to the bottom of her rejection, and is quickly swept up by events she can neither understand nor control. Joining Miss Temple on her adventure are the devious assassin Cardinal Chang and Dr Abeland

The action is unrelenting, with more fights, confrontations, standoffs, chases, abductions and murders than a dozen other such novels put together

Svenson, a surgeon and agent for the German kingdom of Macklenburg.

The action is unrelenting, with more fights, confrontations, standoffs, chases, abductions and murders than a dozen other such novels put together. The result is that the breakneck pace almost becomes too much at times. The serial nature of the book means a major climax in each chapter, and by the time we get to the final showdown we feel like we've seen most of it before. It's heady stuff, but to his credit Dahlquist does manage to bring the whole thing to a satisfying conclusion.

The characters are colourful and well-drawn, visually more like something from a comic than a novel, and all the better for it. Although Dahlquist's fictitious city is richly detailed, a real setting might have been more immediate and involving.

The plot becomes a little complicated at times, but the action carries the reader along so effortlessly that it doesn't prove detrimental to the story. Overall, *The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters* is lavish, compulsive and a lot of fun – written with élan and aplomb. **Peter Loftus**

Already Dead**Charlie Huston • Orbit, 288pp, £6.99 pb**

Already Dead is Charlie Huston's debut into horror, or to be more politically correct, supernatural investigative thrillers. In an age where vampires and ghouls are no longer the stuff of nightmares, the genre has moved on sensationally in recent years and Huston is one author who's taken the chance to redefine the old myths, transforming creatures designed for us to fear, into characters we can instead identify with.

Set in New York, Huston's vampires are victims of a virus which we can only gather has been around for a long a time. The virus feeds off its host's blood and in return gives them superhuman powers, creating a dangerous symbiosis. In order to survive in secret, in what is still an intolerant society, the vampires are organised into rival clans: The Society is a group of hippies devoted to unification; The Coalition are the vampire mafia; and The Enclave are a cross between Buddhists and ninjas, and symbolise how attributes such as peace, manipulation and spirituality are inherent parts of any organised society. Beyond the clans is Joe Pitt – our hero. As a rogue, he works for any clan to keep them off his back. The disappearance of a young gothic girl and the appearance of zombies in the neighbourhood cause ripples through the clans and its Joe's job to discreetly sort the situation out. Unfortunately for Joe, he stumbles into a sinister plot which threatens the very existence of all the clans.

Already Dead essentially reads like a hardboiled crime novel, which is as sharply dialogued as a Tarantino movie. Huston uses a similar vampire myth established in novels such as *I am Legend* and portrays his vampires as victims of a mutation trying to survive. In fact, as the story unfolds and Pitt finds himself caught up in the conspiracy it is, ironically, the normal humans who come across as being evil (Darwin would almost be proud to see such a radical approach to natural selection).

Pitt's journey to discover himself is at the heart of all this and despite temptations to join each of the clans, he remains true to his human principles. Eventually Pitt is given a taster to what may become his path of destiny, a situation which may have interesting repercussions as this excellent series continues. **Kevin Stone**

The British Fantasy Society: A Celebration**Edited by Paul Kane & Marie O'Regan • British Fantasy Society, 304pp, £11.99 pb**

If *Interzone* imposed the reviewing methodology used by governments to assess the efficacy of public services – evaluating the whole in terms of the average of scores given to each of its components – Kane and O'Regan's celebration of the British Fantasy Society would top the league table of fantasy anthologies.

There is certainly much to commend it. There isn't a single duff story: none of them merits less than a B and several are worthy of an A+. But it somehow lacks the charm and appeal of more uneven collections – Paul McAuley and Kim Newman's *In Dreams*, for example. The key drawback is that many of the stories are reprints. There are fine tales from Clive Barker, Michael Marshall Smith, John Connolly, Peter Crowther, Ramsey Campbell, Kim Newman, Peter Straub, Neil Gaiman, Robert Holdstock, Richard Matheson, Robert Silverberg, Stephen Gallagher and Graham Joyce – but they have all appeared elsewhere.

I can understand why *Walt's Work* can be strong motivation for some; but for me, being one of the two or three best hard sf writers around

The anthology is free to BFS members, but general readers will be shelling out twelve quid for six new stories and fourteen reprints. There is, however, some appeal to the idea of a single volume collecting favourite stories, some of which (the Barker, Holdstock and Marshall Smith) have achieved classic status. I should also mention at this point that profits from the book go to the BFS and the 'Black Dust' Nqabakazulu school charity project in South Africa.

And the six new stories are powerful and engaging: a characteristically disturbing story, set at a horror convention, from Christopher Fowler; a haunting tale rooted in East Midlands folklore by Mark Chadbourn; Juliet E. McKenna's smart, deftly realised period piece; Chaz Brenchley's fable of horrific horology in ancient Baghdad; Brian Aldiss's satirical tale of 'the misery that springs from tyranny'; and Simon Clark's deeply disturbing tale of a fantasy convention's masked ball and raffle.

I can't find fault with the editors' tastes, but the collection would have benefited



from greater balance and breadth: the most compelling pieces tend to be tales of horror.

There are lively introductions to most of the stories, outlining the authors' memories of BFS conventions: a couple are too self-congratulatory for comfort, but most offer frank assessments of the importance of the BFS to the author's work, career and social life. There are some genuinely amusing and insightful tales of pranks, desultory conversations, debaucheries and spectacular hangovers. On one occasion I found myself thinking, to paraphrase a former England football manager, 'I wish I'd been a mole on the wall in that hotel'.

There is a literary spectre at this celebratory feast – Nicholas Royle. Royle's friendship and contribution to BFS conventions is celebrated by a couple of the contributors, but his work isn't represented in the anthology. A pity: Royle seems a natural addition to Kane and O'Regan's roster of luminaries and a new story from him might have tilted the balance, making a solid collection into an inspiring one. **Andy Hedgecock**

Membership of the British Fantasy Society is currently £25 UK • £30 EUROPE • £45 ROW, payable to the 'British Fantasy Society' and sent to 201 Reddish Road, South Reddish, Stockport SK5 7HR. For more information visit the BFS website at britishfantasysociety.org.uk

Mathematicians in Love

Rudy Rucker • Tor, 364pp, \$24.95 hb

This is Rucker's sixteenth novel: a nice, mathematically rounded number with a love triangle at its centre and Bela (the narrator), his best friend Paul, and their floating girlfriend, Alma, at the corners.

Bela starts on an alternative Earth and lets us know from the start that he will end up on our Earth. To be exact, he starts in an alternative Berkeley, here called Humelocke. Bela mercifully translates the rest of the names, otherwise the novel risked turning into a lengthy list of puns, and there's enough to concentrate on without that. He doesn't let us know that there will be some truly mind-blowing moments – and at least one moment of true horror. Ah, the unreliable narrator, the awkward mathematician. In a multiverse tale, much can be excused and little is final.

Bela and Paul (together with their barking mentor) develop a massively advanced computer. Paul steals Alma. The government (headed by Rucker's Bush avatar, Joe Doakes) steals the computer.

Bye-bye, democracy. Hello, interesting questions about determinism that our characters won't have much time to explore as the plot shoots violently past

This computer can predict the future, and can even predict the effect of its predictions and test opposing plans. Bye-bye, democracy. Hello, interesting questions about determinism that our characters won't have much time to explore as the plot shoots violently past at high speed.

What's a guy to do? Bela's priority is to form a successful rock band to win back Alma. This he does, as Rucker produces some of the best rock'n'roll fiction that's ever been written – and the intention there is not to damn with faint praise, in case you're wondering. Bela also gets in at the beginning of vlogging – continuous video blogging – in case Alma's not paying attention.

Our triumvirate, in search of a missing character or two, then surf their way into a bizarre bubble universe called La Hampa that is populated by alien mathematicians. Of course, this book is as soaked in maths as any of Rucker's other novels, and most of it probably makes sense. Some of it may be mere hand waving. It doesn't matter. It's an exciting, euphoric adventure with a great big heart. **Jim Steel**

Salon Fantastique: Fifteen Original Tales of Fantasy

Edited by Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling • Thunder's Mouth Press, 396pp, \$16.95 pb

Few anthologies prompt anticipation quite like *Salon Fantastique*. After all, separately and together, editors Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling have influenced the development of fantasy fiction in the US for decades, be it through *Omni* magazine, the Sci Fiction website or a range of anthologies including – so far – seventeen editions of *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. As a collection, it also boasts an impressive list of authors – some as yet less well known to British readers, but including the likes of Delia Sherman, Paul Di Filippo, Jeffrey Ford and Lucius Shepard.

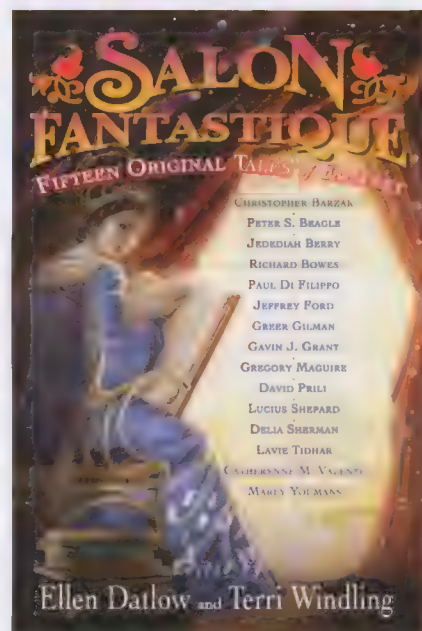
What *Salon Fantastique* does not have – at least at first glance – is a clearly defined subject, theme or argument against which its stories can be regarded. On this occasion, Datlow and Windling have instead chosen to act as hosts of a paperback equivalent to the 17th and 18th century French salons "where writers, artists, philosophers, and political figures

On this occasion, Datlow and Windling have chosen to act as hosts of a paperback equivalent to 17th and 18th century French salons

gathered together...finding creative stimulation in an atmosphere removed from the strict protocols of the French court."

However, the aptness of this analogy – there is no indication that any of the selected writers communicated with each other, let alone influenced the conception of the stories – is ultimately a red herring. Such a fluid and open brief has merely allowed Datlow and Windling to showcase a broad range of stories from current American writers.

So, reading *Salon Fantastique* is an occasionally dazzling timeslip across the continents and the centuries, ranging from Delia Sherman's delightfully realised opener 'La Fee Verte', set amid the 1870 siege of Paris, to contemporary terrorist attacks in 'My Travels With Al-Qaeda' – an ultimately unsatisfactory story from Lavie Tidhar. The range of stories, and the means by which they're told, is equally eclectic; there's the somewhat saccharine tale of two young children defending their new home from disembodied entities (Marly Youmans's 'Concealment Shoes')



and the frankly ostentatious fricassee of entirely forgettable literary pretention otherwise known as Greer Gilman's 'Down the Wall'.

The publishers insist that *Salon Fantastique* straddles "the borderline between 'fantasy' and 'mainstream' fiction," meaning that if all these stories should share one thing it is that they are grounded in "realistic" earthly environments into which the authors have dropped singular fantastical elements – such as bizarre cephalopods that communicate through manipulating our memories, a special whiskey that lets you speak with the dead and then leaves you comatose up amid the branches of the nearest tree afterwards, or a fantastical forgotten city rediscovered by children refugees from an American tsunami.

Though these concepts are in themselves beguiling, it becomes increasingly irritating – as you progress through the collection – that none of the protagonists in these generally striking stories either question or find these fantastical elements at all unusual or unexpected. Intentionally or not, this robs many of the stories of not only any kind of sense but, more importantly, any genuine sense of wonder. Which, considering the marvels being described, is somewhat a shame. **Paul F. Cockburn**

Galactic North

Alastair Reynolds • Gollancz, 388pp, £9.99 hb

This collection of stories, helpfully arranged in narratively chronological sequence, explores the future history created in Reynolds's first novel, *Revelation Space*, and continued in *Chasm City*, *Redemption Ark*, and *Absolution Gap*. There is no official umbrella title for these books, and fandom's default label of the 'Conjoiner' universe is inadequate because parts of the series focus on other futuristic sociopolitical factions of humanity, such as 'Demarchists', 'Ultras', or the 'Coalition'.

'Great Wall of Mars' introduces the 22nd century's human conjoiners, a kind of cybernetic hive mind whose unofficial queen is Galiana. Besieged from orbit by the Earth's military, the conjoiners must flee their Martian nest and escape from the Solar system, but recruiting ex-soldier Nevil Clavain to their cause proves to be the riskiest part of Galiana's exodus. 'Glacial' examines outsider Clavain's struggle to integrate with exiled conjoiners, while investigating the fate of a failed American colony on a desolate ice-planet. Detailed and intriguing, it's a winning combination of hard-SF wonders and cold-case murder mystery with a surprisingly elusive motive.

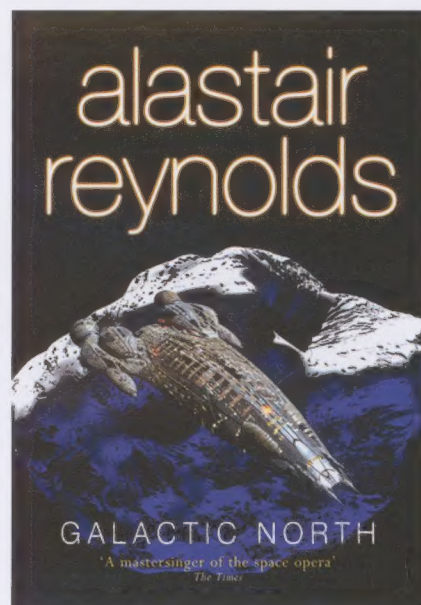
'A Spy in Europa' is basically an interplanetary espionage thriller in the Jovian system, where a lone spook

infiltrates a predominantly genetically-modified culture. It benefits from a suitably chilling denouement. 'Weather' offers an engrossing tale of space piracy that's also a love story. It's tricked out with a full kit of interesting technical details, some admirable character developments, and there's a twisty climax that, for all its logical predictability, remains both undeniably tragic and profoundly moving. The hoary old cliché of a haunted spaceship gets a fresh perspective in 'Dilation Sleep', which boasts another easily anticipated but nonetheless very clever twist ending, while the next story, 'Grafenwalder's Bestiary', offers a refreshing take on the overly familiar sf idea of a private zoo for exotic aliens, and neatly links to Reynolds' 'Europa' tale.

'Nightingale' (like 'Weather and 'Bestiary') is all-new material, and it breathes life into a routine 'mercenaries on a mission' scenario. Playing upon common fears of medical machines, and character-sketching its doomed heroine with effortless style, the story delivers a grimly horrific yet suitably poetic antiwar message. The last and, arguably, most visionary story – albeit more akin to darkest Vinge than optimistic Clarke – here is 'Galactic North', which is such an inspired title it really should be adopted as the directive label for Reynolds' series. An episodic tale, starting in the 24th century with a violent act of space piracy and its unforeseeable aftermath, 'Galactic North' is a dazzling

narrative of betrayal, revenge and eventual redemption that spans millennia, as its main players are forced to adapt in order to survive in an ever-changing galaxy.

Serving up diced chunks of Niven and Sterling, rolled in a Banks and Benford pastry, Reynolds's spicy recipe for science fiction is so cutting edge there's often blood spilt all over the kitchen. His work is not as consistently fascinating as the latest from Stross, or as zippy as Asher's fast-breeder *Polity* series, but Reynolds's future history is often startlingly inventive, and more reassuringly humane. **Tony Lee**



Words of Birth and Death

Hannu Rajaniemi • Bloc Press, 44pp, £4 pb

Johanna Sinisalo's introduction reminds us contemporary Finnish culture is rooted in myth that's influenced generations of writers. The concepts of guardian spirits and words of power are blithely adopted by many fantasy writers. Hannu Rajaniemi explores darker, more dangerously uncompromising aspects of such ideas, all the more powerfully as he blends the mythic so deftly with wholly contemporary characters, whose concerns we can all share. His writing is spare and precise, vividly atmospheric and his stories are both solidly satisfying as well as enticingly thought-provoking.

In 'The Viper Blanket', old Markku and his brother head for a family gathering on

All Hallows Eve. Their ancestress, daughter of Tuoni, of death, left the House of the Dead to search for the man who had called her beautiful, only to lose her virginity on a bed of bones to a warrior roused by bloodlust. Now her descendants can escape death by shedding unbaptised blood, a murderous secret binding them all to their dark pagan clan. But Markku plans a new sacrifice, looking forward, not back. Losing Marketta, his beloved for so many years, showed him Tuoni's grief for her lost daughter. Now he understands life and death entirely anew.

In 'Barley Child', Oranen comes home to his late father's farm, driving his BMW, fleeing the scandalous wreckage of his marriage, his company and the tabloids' delight. Wandering in the barley field, suicidal and drunk, he encounters the giant spirit Pekko who challenges him to a drinking game. The cup is Oranen's father's

skull and the stakes are the life of his first born son. Oranen loses, falling asleep dead drunk, only to wake to a fresh appreciation of life after such a dark dream. What he doesn't realise is just who had really been playing the game.

In 'Fisher of Men', Jakko is another modern man escaping business and relationship pressures on a remote island, enjoying the second home he'd first designed in the Second Life computer game. He's hardly pleased to encounter a strange woman cooking fish on his beach. Too late, he learns that she's the Daughter of the Sea, she has claimed him and the consolations of her seduction notwithstanding, there's no escape. Not until Jakko accepts that he's caught up in a myth and braves a quest taking him far beyond the sanitised safety of computer games. Read the story and judge for yourself who really wins. **Juliet McKenna**

Star Begotten: A Biological Fantasia**H.G. Wells • Wesleyan University, 156pp, \$22.95 hb**

Star Begotten was first published in 1937. Just four years earlier Wells had published *The Shape of Things to Come*, which, along with its film version, showed his desire for a clean and ordered world to rise out of the chaos of his present. *Star Begotten* continues in this direct line, as if wishing could have made it so. And yet none of Wells's concerns have ever really gone away: "Our social order is bankrupt. It is not delivering the goods... War, pervading and increasing brutality, lack of any real liberty...frightful insufficiency in the midst of possible superabundance...we are heading for a world-wide war-smash..." (114).

The novel examines these issues through Mr Joseph Davis, who sets to thinking about cosmic rays during a discussion at his club. Maybe the rays could lead to mutations taking place in human beings. The idea gets loose and becomes a nine-day wonder for many others, as well as the media. Perhaps cosmic rays are being deliberately targeted on Earth, to change

Mr Joseph Davis sets to thinking about cosmic rays during a discussion at his club. Maybe the rays could lead to mutations taking place in human beings

humanity. The beings behind it become labelled as 'Martians'.

A cry from the heart – for the need for humanity to grow up – soon develops in the story. Changes will be necessary, with the new people standing up to the likes of the Common Fool and the Boss. If it takes the influence of the Martians to bring that about, then so be it. A sane and enlightened world will be the final result of their long struggles. It's all told as an apparently simple story, disarmingly so. The narrative voice is jaunty and almost dares the reader not to take things too seriously. There are many striking phrases and the imagery is clear and direct.

The lights were well on their way to going out again by 1937. "Our world is in liquidation. We are played out. And they are coming, they are coming now, to succeed us and make a new world." (135). Wells would soon declare that his mind was at the end of its tether. The new world might be stillborn. *Star Begotten* was a seductive attempt, on the involuntary way there, to believe that this possibility need not be so. **John Howard**

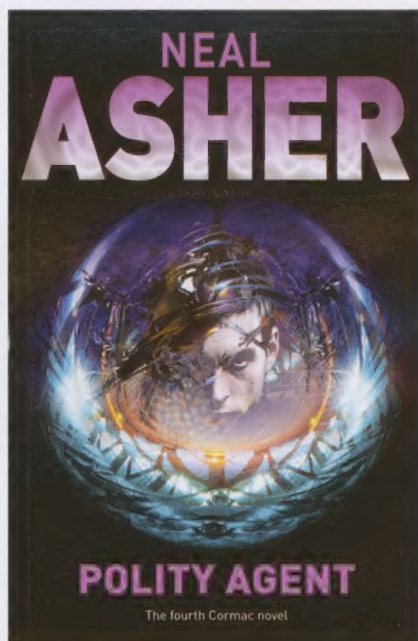
Polity Agent**Neal Asher • Tor UK, 488pp, £17.99 hb**

With *Polity Agent*, Neal Asher begins to display his strengths as a writer of novels within the larger format of a science fiction series. *Polity Agent* is the fourth Agent Cormac novel, and readers who have not read the previous three are advised that this is not a good place to start. Events within them are referenced early and often.

Asher's latest is easily his best yet. His prose is more confident and he manages to pull off a number of subversive commentaries on the here-and-now while unfolding his latest grand adventure. A viral technology is loose in the Polity. Agent Cormac is called upon to find out where it came from and if it can be stopped. But those who are able to combat it are moving well beyond the human. Can humanity save itself and remain human?

Polity Agent involves all the appurtenances of Asher's previous novels: big weapons, big monsters, and human disasters on an increasingly cosmic scale. He even slips in some of the 'time opera' nuances we saw in *Cowl* and addresses the question of singularity. But his best work comes in the unfolding characterisations of Orlandine, a 'haiman' who turns murderer in order to study some dangerous alien tech; and Howard Blegg, an immortal human who pulls levers behind the scenes.

A great novel in itself, but one that also transforms the entire series. **Rick Kleffel**

**The Culled****Simon Spurrier • Abaddon, 380pp, £6.99 pb**

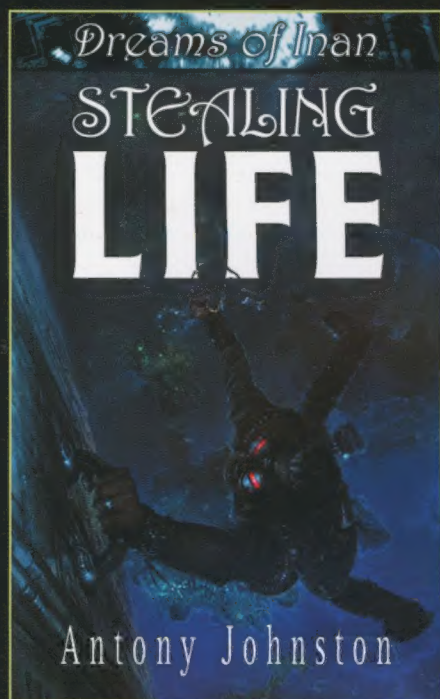
This is the first volume of 'The Afterblight Chronicles', set in some dystopian future where a virus has wiped out the entire human race except for those with an O blood type, plunging the world into chaos.

The never named first person narrator is some kind of super soldier, a ruthless killer who makes James Bond look like a pussycat, engaged in a top secret mission that brings him up against the Apostolic Church of the Rediscovered Dawn. The book hits the ground running, with a plane crash at La Guardia and ensuing gunfight with the Clergy, and seldom lets up, with one action set piece hard on the heels of another.

Chances are none of this will be unfamiliar to seasoned sf readers, and more so film watchers. The post-plague scenario is a staple of the genre, and there's nothing especially new here, but part of the fun of reading *The Culled* is picking out all the stuff that's gone before. The *Mad Max* films are an obvious exemplar, while the battlewagon from *Dawn of the Dead* puts in an appearance and one whole sequence reprises *Running Man* (the Schwarzenegger film rather than the King novel). Spurrier writes well though, and his grasp of the material is assured, particularly in the battle scenes, which are vivid and exciting, and he brings a wealth of incidental detail to the story that grounds it in reality and ensures all the pieces of the jigsaw fit. The plot, if a bit obvious in places, rolls along at a nice pace, giving us plenty of bang for our buck and characters we can believe in.

On the down side, mention of television programmes such as *Only Fools and Horses* and the level of technology on display place the action in the near future, but several times we are told 59 billion people died in The Cull, which simply doesn't add up unless the story is taking place in some alternative (and preposterously fertile) reality. Neither was I particularly convinced by the revelation of what is happening to the children taken from their parents by the Church, one of the book's main plot hooks, while our hero's mission, when finally disclosed, comes as something of an anti-climax. These are quibbles however, and won't seriously detract from enjoyment of a lively and entertaining variation on several well trod themes. Recommended. **Peter Tennant**

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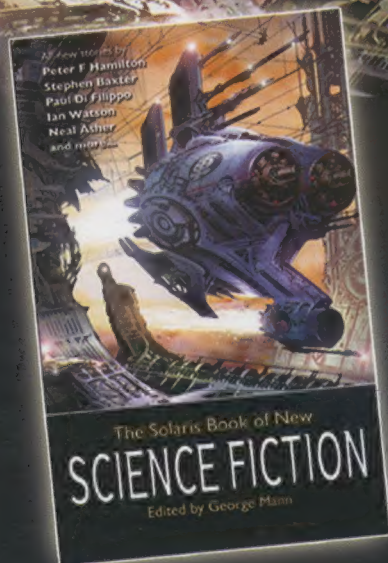
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